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PHILOSOPHIC SAGACITY AND INTERCULTURAL PHILOSOPHY

BEYOND HENRY ODERA ORUKA

Pius Maija Mosima

PHILOSOPHIC SAGACITY AND INTERCULTURAL PHILOSOPHY:

BEYOND HENRY ODERA ORUKA

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PHILOSOPHIC SAGACITY AND INTERCULTURAL PHILOSOPHY:

BEYOND HENRY ODERA ORUKA

DEDICATION

To my father:

Papa Joseph Mokonya Mosima (Rest in Peace)

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Believe me, I am quite capable of making my own mistakes—none of these people had anything to do with any errors or omissions in this dissertation.

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Summary

In this work, I attempt to contribute to the future of African and intercultural philosophy. This is undertaken by a comparative appraisal of the late lamented Kenyan philosopher Henry Odera Oruka's (1944–1995) philosophic sagacity, and intercultural philosophy as conceived by Dutch intercultural philosopher Wim van Binsbergen. Oruka (1990a) identifies four main trends in contemporary African philosophy: ethnophilosophy, professional philosophy, nationalist–ideological philosophy, and philosophic sagacity or sage philosophy. He later added hermeneutic and artistic/literary trends (Oruka 1991). I review the debate on the existence, nature, and identity of African philosophy and posit the relevance of intercultural philosophy to contemporary African philosophy. I examine the major issues around ethnophilosophy with a reading of Tempels and Kagame and the main criticisms, especially those of Oruka, in a bid to posit his rationale for endorsing philosophic sagacity. I focus on Oruka's philosophic sagacity and the methodology used in investigating it. I attempt to answer two main questions: what is sage philosophy and how does one distinguish it from the other forms of philosophy that are available in Africa? African sage philosophy or philosophic sagacity commonly refers to the body of thought produced by persons considered wise by their communities. Oruka categorizes these wise persons into two groups: folk sages and philosophic sages. Folk sages are well versed in the popular wisdom, culture, and beliefs of their people. They are essentially conformists with the communal set-up. They are folk sages because they do not transcend the celebrated folk wisdom of their people. They remain at the first order of sage philosophy: popular wisdom. Philosophic sages are those that seek rational foundation and critically evaluate commonly held cultural beliefs. They are able to transcend the communal beliefs of their societies by taking a critical and rational distance. When interviewed by a professional philosopher, they are able to provide balanced answers on various themes, such as the nature of the Supreme Being, the nature of death, the nature of time, the concept of the person, the meaning of freedom and equality, the nature of education, and so on. This triggers Oruka to compare them to Western philosophers in spite of the fact that some of them are unable to read or write. He dismisses ethnophilosophy as a collective mode of philosophizing and endorses the individual sage as the valid mode of philosophizing. This, according to Oruka, is standard African traditional wisdom, which obtains in the

African context. I also employ post-modernist (post-structuralist) and other criticisms of Oruka's philosophic sagacity and show how post-modernist ideas (deconstruction of single identity, Western hegemony, and bounded culture) are used as a bridge to my proposal of intercultural philosophy. I identify globalization as one of the most important socio-political and cultural developments in our contemporary world that needs philosophical scrutiny. I examine Oruka's philosophic sagacity and the orientations of several African philosophers to see if they can stand the test of time. This permits me to invite African/intercultural philosophers to think beyond local to global sagacity. I attempt to go beyond their positions by exploding their contentious conception of culture and examining whether intercultural communication is possible or not. This is achieved through a discussion of intercultural philosophers such as Ram Adhar Mall and Wim van Binsbergen. Finally, I identify the main challenges for the contemporary African/intercultural philosopher. The challenges are enormous, but we need to create an intercultural framework in a bid to go beyond borders. I propose an intercultural hermeneutic, one that is couched in counter-hegemonic discourses and that will allow us to cross borders, as the globalization process requires us to do.

RESUME

Ce travail est un essai de contribution à la consolidation de l'avenir de la philosophie africaine et interculturelle. Cela se fait par une évaluation comparative de la sagacité philosophique de Henry Odera Oruka, philosophe kenyan de regrettée mémoire (1945-1995) et la philosophie interculturelle, telle que conçue par le philosophe interculturel néerlandais, Wim van Binsbergen. Oruka (1990a) identifie quatre principaux courants de la philosophie africaine contemporaine. Ces tendances comprennent entre autres, l'ethnophilosophie, la philosophie professionnelle, la philosophie nationaliste et idéologique, la sagacité philosophique ou philosophie du sage. A celles-ci il, greffe plus tard l'herméneutique et les tendances littéraires/artistiques (Oruka 1991). Je fais l'état des lieux des débats sur l'existence, la nature et l'essence de la philosophie africaine et je pose le principe de la pertinence de la philosophie interculturelle dans le champ de la philosophie africaine contemporaine. J'examine les grandes questions autour de l'ethnophilosophie avec une lecture de Tempels, de Kagame et des principales exégèses, singulièrement celles

de Oruka, dans le but de justifier la raison d'être de la sagacité philosophique. Je me concentre sur la sagacité philosophique de Oruka et la méthodologie utilisée dans l'enquête. Je tente de répondre à deux questions essentielles: Qu'est-ce que la philosophie du sage et comment peut-on la distinguer des autres formes de philosophies qu'on rencontre dans le champ de la pensée africaine ? La philosophie du sage africain ou sagacité philosophique désigne communément le corps de pensée produite par des personnes considérées comme sage par leurs communautés. Oruka catégorise ces sages en deux groupes: les sages folkloriques et des sages philosophiques. Les sages folkloriques désignent ceux qui sont en parfaite osmose avec la sagesse populaire, la culture et les croyances de leur peuple. Ils sont essentiellement conformistes envers la configuration commune. Ce sont des gens folkloriquement sages parce qu'ils ne transcendent pas la sagesse populaire magnifiée par leur peuple. Ils restent au seuil de la philosophie du sage, qui est la sagesse populaire. Les sages philosophiques quant à eux renvoient à ceux qui cherchent le fondement logique à toute pensée et passent aux cribles de la raison les croyances culturelles communément admises comme axiomes. Ils sont capables de transcender les croyances communes de leurs sociétés en prenant une distance critique et rationnelle. Lorsqu'ils sont interrogés par un philosophe professionnel, ils sont capables de fournir des réponses mesurées sur divers thèmes, tels que la nature de l'Être suprême, la nature de la mort, la nature du temps, le concept de personne, le sens de la liberté, de l'égalité, la nature de l'éducation, etc. Cela pousse Oruka à les comparer aux philosophes occidentaux en dépit du fait que certains d'entre eux soient incapables de lire ou d'écrire. Il rejette ethnophilosophie en tant que mode collectif de philosopher et approuve le sage individu comme le mode valide de philosopher. Ce qui, selon Oruka, est la sagesse traditionnelle africaine standard, obtenue en contexte africain. Je convoque aussi des postmodernistes (poststructuralistes) et d'autres critiques de la sagacité philosophique d'Oruka pour révéler comment les idées postmoderniste (déconstruction de l'identité unique, l'hégémonie occidentale et la culture délimitée) servent de ponts d'analyse à la philosophie interculturelle que je propose. J'identifie la mondialisation comme l'un des développements sociopolitiques et culturels les plus importants dans notre monde contemporain qui a besoin d'un examen philosophique minutieux. Je tente de voir si la sagacité philosophique d'Oruka et les orientations de plusieurs philosophes africains peuvent résister à l'épreuve du temps. Cela me permet d'inviter les philosophes interculturels africains à

éviter tout nombrilisme culturel et à envisager par conséquent une sagacité philosophique à l'échelle planétaire. Je tente d'aller au-delà de leurs positions par l'exploration de leur conception controversée de la culture, et pour voir si la communication interculturelle est possible. Cela est rendu possible avec la confrontation des philosophes interculturels comme Ram Adhar Mall et Wim van Binsbergen. Enfin, j'identifier les principaux défis que doit relever le philosophe interculturel / contemporain africain. Ces défis sont titanesques, mais il nous faut créer un cadre interculturel afin d'aller au-delà des frontières. Dans cette optique, je suggère une herméneutique interculturelle, formulée dans le contre-discours hégémonique mais qui nous permet de traverser les frontières comme nous le fait comprendre le processus de mondialisation.

1

INTRODUCTION: AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

1.1. Introduction

This dissertation entails a comparative philosophical appraisal of the concept of philosophic sagacity, as advanced by the late, and much lamented, Kenyan philosopher Henry Odera Oruka (1944–1995). I will attempt to critically evaluate his contributions to the development of contemporary African philosophy. This comparative appraisal will be from an intercultural philosophical perspective as conceived by the Dutch Africanist[1] philosopher and anthropologist, Wim van Binsbergen.

The birth of the mode of discourse known as African philosophy is quite an interesting one.[2] A version of this species of discourse has its origins in a specific form of counter-discourse which Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu termed 'conceptual decolonization' and his fellow countryman Anthony Kwame Appiah refers to as 'ideological decolonization'. Western philosophy is a product of a civilization and a disciplinary quest that is almost three thousand years old. African philosophy, on the other hand, has no such history, unless the arguments and conclusions of Afrocentrism are accepted in totality.

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[1] Initially, the term 'Africanist' was used primarily to refer to a branch of linguistics. Nowadays, it is used internationally to denote the academic study of (Sub-Saharan) Africa in general, as pursued by Africans as well as people from other continents. I am using the term here in this disciplinary sense. However, in the recent democratic South African context—deservedly dominated by the African National Congress (ANC), which brought the country to democratic majority rule—the term often refers specifically to opposition parties with a mainly Black constituency and a political agenda centred on the African continent, such as the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC).

[2] Osha (2006). In an attempt to trace the 20th-century origins of academic philosophy in Anglophone Africa, Barry Hallen (2009), for example, asserts that academic philosophy in Anglophone Africa arose in a 'conservative', yet 'turbulent' intellectual climate. It was conservative because philosophical paradigms in the English-language academia derived mainly from the analytic tradition, which provided a comparatively more narrow conception of philosophy than its European Continental counterparts. It was turbulent because there were competing claims about what should constitute the sources of African philosophy as advocated by Africanists and African intellectuals from a diverse variety of disciplinary and vocational backgrounds—such as social anthropology, missionary and religious scholarship, and academic philosophy (Hallen 2009: 23).

Let me elaborate. The claim that examples of philosophical texts existed in Ancient Egypt is sometimes identified with the school of thought that has come to be known as Afrocentrism.[3] For American Africanist philosopher Barry Hallen (2009:8), Afrocentrism itself is sometimes unfairly and one-dimensionally typed as an attempt to inflate the international importance and influence of Ancient Egyptian culture totally out of proportion to the 'scientific' evidence for it. But from a historical and cultural point of view, the re-affirmation of Ancient Egypt as an integral part of the African continent constitutes a rejection by African scholars of those who have regarded the Saharan and Nubian deserts as a kind of 'iron curtain' between the 'black' African cultural orientations to their south and the 'non-black' (but somehow also 'non-white') peoples to their north. Congolese Egyptologist and philosopher Theophile Obenga, for example, contests such an 'iron curtain'. At worst, the qualitatively different characteristics of the civilizations thereafter attributed to these two groups are said to have interchanged racism from the modern to the Ancient World. At best, they are said to disregard the history of the commercial and cultural exchanges that always took place between North, West, East, Central, and South Africa.

Afrocentrism is probably best known in Western scholarship for its arguments that both the form and content of Ancient Greek and subsequently European/Western philosophy and science were derived directly from Egyptian civilization. This view urged scholars studying Greek and Roman civilization to posit that the character of Greek thought and civilization was, fundamentally, different and distinctive from that of their Egyptian counterparts. Hence, no such fundamental linkage or crossover can be established. The Greeks are allegedly distinguished by their 'abstract' and 'reasoned' thought, while Egyptian thought is characterized as 'regimented' and 'practical'.[4] British-born Sinologist and

[3] Molefi Kete Asante (1990) coined the term 'Afrocentrism' to refer to a cultural ideology and worldview dedicated to the history and influence of Black people. Afrocentrism intends to expose the global Eurocentric racist attitudes towards African people and their place in global cultural history. For the sake of clarity, it is important to distinguish between two essential variants of Afrocentrism: the one that cherishes images of an original (or prospective) African home as a source of inspiration and self-esteem; and the other variant, which claims that Africa possesses these qualities for the specific reason that all civilization originates in Africa. Throughout this work, I personally subscribe to the former variant because it offers a great promise to our quest for interculturality. The latter variant, on the other hand, can be contested from historical evidence and intercontinental cultural interactions (van Binsbergen (2011a)). For more on the debate on Afrocentrism see, for example, Diop (1974); Bernal (1987, 1991, 2006); Asante (1990); Lefkowitz (1996); Lefkowitz & Rogers (1996); and van Binsbergen (1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 2003, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2012b, 2012c).

[4] Lefkowitz (1996); Lefkowitz & Rogers (1996).

intellectual historian Martin Bernal (1937–2013), who published *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classic Civilization*, made the demolition of this view his life's work.[5] He tried to present sufficient empirical evidence to establish the importance of ancient intellectual interactions between Greek, Semitic Mediterranean, and African peoples on an acceptably scientific basis. Bernal's main argument is that the roots of Western civilization are to be sought not in Ancient Greece but outside Europe, in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia (and perhaps ultimately in Sub-Saharan Africa). Bernal (1991, 2006) discusses, largely based on linguistic arguments, the cultural relations between Ancient Egypt and the Aegean region (today, Greece and western Turkey) in the Middle and Late Bronze Age (c. 2000–1200 BCE).

Even though the initiator of the *Black Athena* thesis has come under criticism,[6] van Binsbergen (2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2012b), without turning a blind eye to Bernal's shortcomings, largely defends him against implicitly hegemonic criticism, conducting a constructive re-assessment of *Black Athena*. He applies Bernal's inspiration to the global comparative and historical study of selected, relatively minor items of formalized culture (mankala board games and geomantic divination), and here he finds confirmation of the Bernalian/Afrocentrist schema. In his quest for intercultural counter-hegemony, van Binsbergen broadens the scope for intercontinental comparison with ancillary sciences such as population genetics, long-range linguistics, archaeology, and comparative mythology. Moreover, his intercultural philosophical focus drove him increasingly not so much to conceptual theorizing, but to empirical historical exploration in wider and wider stretches of space and time.[7] This method enables him to empirically underpin the premise of the fundamental unity of humankind and to endorse the undeniable empirical reality of massive cultural continuities through space and time, on a transcontinental scale, and profoundly involving Africa. This leads him to argue:

> We cannot treat any proposed South–North cultural influence of sub-Saharan Africa upon the Mediterranean (via Ancient Egypt), and thus upon Eurasia at large, as an independent and all-explaining factor; instead, the commonalities between Greece and Egypt are to be explained, largely, from a common West Asian/Mediterranean source

[5] Bernal (1987, 1991, 2006).

[6] The main collection of critical studies of *Black Athena* is Lefkowitz & Rogers (1996). There is more discussion of Bernal's *Black Athena* thesis in Chapter 7 of this work.

[7] I will return to van Binsbergen's approach to intercultural philosophy below.

> in the Neolithic and Bronze Age, for which 'Pelasgian' seems a fitting name […]. This also leads to a totally different interpretation of the relation between Egyptian Neith and Greek Athena and of the etymology of their names.(van Binsbergen 2011a: 7)

Nevertheless, given the problematic ruptures and discontinuities between contemporary African realities and the undoubtedly impressive cultural and intellectual achievements of Ancient Egypt, it is difficult to sustain a continuous relationship between the two textual genres. For the sake of the argument in this work, let us begin the quest for the origins of African philosophy with its encounter with post-Enlightenment modernity, which in the case of Africa and much of the Third World entails the realities and the histories of the following events: slavery, apartheid, colonization, decolonization, and the post-colonial aftermath which Cameroonian philosopher and political scientist, Achille Mbembe, terms 'neo-colony' (Mbembe 2001). It is in this painful existential matrix that one locates the birth of African philosophy in its modern and its contemporary formation.[8]

Philosophy in Africa has been, since its very inception more than half a century ago, dominated by the discussion of one compound question:

- Is there an African philosophy?
- And if there is, what is it? (Bodunrin 1981:163). How can we retrieve it? What are the conditions of its possibility (Mudimbe 1988: ix)?

The first part of this question has unhesitatingly been answered in the affirmative. Some, however, including cosmopolitan African philosophers such as Valentin Yves Mudimbe and Kwame Anthony Appiah, are hesitant on this affirmation; and Paulin Jidenu Hountondji, a philosopher from the Republic of Benin, opts out by a mere nominal approach, asserting that African philosophy is simply global academic philosophy by people who happen to be Africans. The late French missionary and philosopher, Henri Maurier, however, has this answer: "The answer [to the question as to whether an African philosophy exists] must surely be: No! Not yet!"[9]

[8] Osha (2006: 156).

[9] Maurier (1984: 25).

Nevertheless, dispute has been primarily over the second part of the question, as the various specimens of African philosophy presented do not pass muster (Bodunrin 1981). Those who refuse to accept certain specimens as philosophy have also been said to deny an affirmative answer to the first part of the question. Nigerian philosopher Godwin Sogolo observes that one frequently gets the 'uncomfortable impression that that question itself is what constitutes African philosophy'.[10] Now, why should the question, 'Is there an African philosophy?' be so central? Rather than doing philosophy, these paralysing questions and forays into unproductive ontology prevailed in the initial attempts to define the parameters of the discipline. Hountondji's view that 'philosophy is not a system but a history, essentially an open process, a restless, unfinished quest, not closed knowledge' has not provided satisfactory insights into these questions.[11]American philosopher Jay van Hook doubts aloud when he argues that anyone even superficially acquainted with Western philosophy is familiar with such designations as 'British philosophy' or 'American philosophy', or 'French' or 'German philosophy', or, more broadly, with 'Anglo-American' and 'Continental philosophy'. These labels do not puzzle anyone. In addition, reference to Asian philosophy has become increasingly common in the West. Therefore, what is the problem with 'African philosophy?' Why is its existence and nature in doubt, and what implications would a satisfactory answer have (van Hook 1993:29)? Suppose it should turn out that there is no African philosophy or that Africans do not philosophize. Would that make any difference? Should every aspect of Western culture have an African counterpart? Nevertheless, such a casual dismissal of the problem ignores the important observation made by one of the leading Africana philosophers,[12] American-born Lucius Outlaw, concerning the high status of philosophy in Western culture:

[10] Sogolo (1990: 41).

[11] Hountondji (1983: 71).

[12] Africana philosophy refers to the works of philosophers of African descent and others whose work deals with the subject matter of the African Diaspora. The notion 'African Diaspora', modelled after the concept of 'Jewish Diaspora', was coined in the 1990s and entered common usage in the 2000s. It pertains to the various communities all over the world that come from the historic movement of peoples from Africa, primarily to Europe, the Americas, and other areas around the globe. Historically, this notion was used to refer to the descendants of West and Central Africans who were sold as slaves and taken to Brazil and the United States of America, or those who voluntarily migrated to other continents. Prominent Africana philosophers include Lewis Gordon, Frantz Fanon, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Robert Bernasconi.

> Philosophy has been one of the most privileged of disciplines, especially in its self-appointed role as guardian of the self-image of the brokers of Western history and culture. Were this not the case, there would have been no debate about 'African philosophy'. Thus any discussion of *African* philosophy involves, *necessarily*, confronting this privileged self-image. (Outlaw 1987a: 35)

Appiah supports Outlaw's observation:

> The urge to find something in Africa that 'lives up to' the label is, in part, a question of wanting to find something that deserves the dignity […]. (Appiah 1992:93)

Van Hook (1993) contends that questions concerning the nature and existence of African philosophy are thus perceived as reflecting a Western colonial bias, such that there is no such thing as—and there never has been (and some may even insist there cannot be)—an African philosophy, because allegedly [I am still rendering this Western colonial bias] Africans cannot be considered as rational beings or are simply not as rational as Westerners, or they lack the disposition needed to philosophize. It is this perception, no doubt, which lies behind Outlaw's denial that questions about African philosophy's existence are 'benign queries' and his accusation that:

> They convey the putrid stench of a wretchedness that fertilizes the soil from which they grow. (Outlaw 1987b:9)

He points out that any questions about the nature of a specific academic discipline, such as African philosophy, are relatively minor compared with the deeper issue:

> The deeper issue is one with much higher stakes: it is a struggle over the meaning of 'man' and 'civilized human', and all that goes with this in the context of the political economy of the capitalized and Europeanized Western world. In light of the European incursion into Africa, the emergence of African philosophy poses deconstructive (and reconstructive) challenges. (Outlaw 1987b:11)

Even if Outlaw is correct about questions concerning the existence of African philosophy, questions concerning the nature of the philosophy need not be viewed as excruciatingly bad or unpleasant. For one might argue quite plausibly that questions concerning the nature of African philosophy are indicative, at least in part, of a much more general concern about the necessary and sufficient conditions for anything to count as philosophy. The late Nigerian philosopher Peter Bodunrin observed:

> The different positions as to the nature of African philosophy held by various contemporary Africans reflect different understandings of the meanings of philosophy itself. (Bodunrin 1991:65)

These different understandings, moreover, are by no means unique to Africa, for they are to be found in Europe and America as well. As G. Salemohamed, the Mauritian philosopher notes:

> There is no general agreement within Western philosophy about the criteria applicable to philosophy. (Salemohamed 1983:535)

This is evident in the frequent charges and counter-charges that this or that philosopher or school of philosophy is 'not really philosophy'. The issue of philosophy's identity may be more visible in Africa than in the West, however, because dominant and marginal philosophical traditions are neither as clear nor as firmly established.[13]

In an attempt to answer the questions or demonstrate examples of the existence and nature of African philosophy, a deeper analysis reveals that there are generally two distinct senses in the usage of the expression 'African philosophy'.

[13] An example is the debate about the nature and existence of African philosophy, a debate which was largely sustained by the first generation of university-trained African philosophers. The first inspiration to the debate was provided by Tempels' *La philosophie bantoue*, first published in Dutch (*Bantoe-filosofie*) in 1945. Academic African philosophy in the 1970s and 1980s was dominated by the heated ideological debate between defenders and critics of ethnophilosophy. The two main groups were the 'traditionalists', with a particularizing perspective, and the 'universalists' or 'modernists', with a universalizing point of view. For more on the history of this debate see, for example, Oruka (1975, 1990a); Bodunrin (1981); and Mudimbe (1988). .

1.2. The particularizing perspective

In one sense, African philosophy is explained or defined in opposition to philosophy in other continents—and, in particular, to Western or European philosophy. It is presupposed that Africans have a unique way of thinking and conceptualizing that makes them radically non-European. Hence, African philosophy is understood as a corpus of thoughts and beliefs produced by this way of thinking. This dimension brands European philosophy as critical and rigorous analysis, logical explanation, and synthesis, as opposed to African philosophy, which is believed to be innocent of such properties. African philosophy is supposed to be based on intuition, related to mysticism and opposed to or beyond rationalism. This is essentially the point of view of Lucien Lévy-Brühl (1857–1939), a French ethnologist/philosopher of the early 20thcentury. The late philosopher and poet who became the first president of an independent Senegal, Léopold Sedar Senghor (1906–2001), shares this view when he asserts that European reasoning is analytical by utilization, while Negro-African reasoning is intuitive by participation.

What is conceived, from this perspective, as African philosophy is the collection, interpretation, and dissemination of African proverbs, folktales, myths, and other traditional material of a philosophical tendency. This evokes a culturalist thesis to the effect that any philosophy is qualified by the cultural orientation of its propounders. Accordingly, no philosophic theme can be handled competently without familiarity with culture, leaving each culture with an in-built philosophy (Outlaw 1987b). Thus, one can refer to an African philosophy, a Chinese philosophy, an Indian philosophy, and so on. This particularizing perspective is what Bodunrin characterizes as the ‘traditionalists’ as opposed to the ‘modernists’. The view of the traditionalists sketched above differs from the general definition of philosophy endorsed by the modernists, as we shall see below.

1.3. The universalizing perspective

In its general sense, philosophy is viewed, especially in North Atlantic society, as a universal discipline whose meaning and content are independent of racial or regional boundaries and particular disciplines. Philosophy is regarded as a discipline that in the strict sense employs the method of critical, reflective, and logical inquiry. African philosophy, therefore, is not expected to be a special case to this meaning of philosophy (Hountondji 1983). This universalizing perspective provides the possibility of an intercultural philosophy.

The authors of the universalizing tendency deny the idea of an African philosophy because most philosophical problems transcend racial and cultural boundaries. African philosophy can only be authentic when ideas are appropriated and discussed in the African context.[14] This is more or less a universalistic/modernist conception of philosophy, as opposed to the culturalist/traditionalist view of the particularizing perspective. Hence, philosophy is not seen as a monopoly of Europe or any race but as an activity for which every race has the potentiality.

Most philosophers in Africa either agree with one of these two conceptions summarized above or vacillate between them. Indeed, the literature on the birth and nature of African philosophy is vast and quite remarkable.[15] For academic research on African philosophy today, the deadlock between the so-called 'traditionalists' and 'modernists' that dominated the 1970s and 1980s no longer constitutes such a fundamental obstacle (Kresse 2007:17). The heated ideological debate between defenders and critics of ethnophilosophy—the quasi-ethnographic project of presenting collective worldviews of ethnic groups as philosophies—has largely subsided and led to a wide variety of projects, among them the development of more complex research and discussions. It is now obvious that a diametrical opposition between the description of folk wisdom and culturally based worldviews and the production of critical and scientifically oriented treatises on modernization is misdirected. There are approaches with the character of a 'third alternative' (Oruka 1991:43) or 'third ways' between these two poles which have been developed, promising fresh perspectives for research on the documentation and reconstruction of philosophical discourse in Africa. In addition, the reconstruction of culturally specific 'conceptual schemes' of African philosophical traditions has been initiated,[16] as well as the contextualized documentation of philosophical interviews with individual sages.[17]

From the countless differences in the meaning and definition of philosophy, different models have been identified and defended and constitute the current scene in contemporary African philosophy.

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[14] Hountondji (1983); Bodunrin (1991); Oruka (1991).

[15] See, for example, Bodunrin (1981); Mudimbe (1988, 1994); Masolo (1994); Hountondji (1996); and Gyekye (1997).

[16] Mudimbe (1988); Appiah (1992); Sogolo (1993, 1998); Gyekye (1995).

[17] Oruka (1991); Graness & Kresse (1997); Ochieng'-Odhiambo (1997, 2002a, 2002b, 2006); Presbey (1997, 1999, 2007).

1.4. Models of African philosophy

Oruka (1990a) identifies four trends in current African philosophy. These are ethnophilosophy, professional philosophy, nationalist–ideological philosophy, and philosophic sagacity. They were presented to the debate on African philosophy in Oruka's *Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy.*[18] In the following sections, we will present brief summaries of these four main models of African philosophy.

1.5. Ethnophilosophy

Among the four trends listed above, ethnophilosophy is perhaps the earliest approach of them all (Boele van Hensbroek 1998, 1999). It treats the subject of African philosophy as a form of folk wisdom. Thus, beliefs, which are generally known to be characteristic of anthropological or religious systems, are depicted as typical examples of African philosophy. The earliest known works in this trend include *La philosophie Bantou* (1945) of the Belgian missionary Rev. Fr Placide Tempels (1906–1977), the Rwandan priest Rev. Fr Alexis Kagame (1912–1981), who wrote *La philosophie Bantou-Rwandaise l'Etre* (1956), and the Kenyan Rev. Pastor John Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy* (1970).

1.6. Is Tempels an African philosopher?

Before we continue discussing the various models in contemporary African philosophy, it is necessary to comment on Placide Tempels. Many Africans *by birth* would be horrified to see us list Tempels' seminal work above as a genuine contribution to African

[18] Oruka (1991: 5) later added two other approaches to African philosophy: the hermeneutic, and the artistic or literary trends. The hermeneutic trend more specifically accommodates those who choose a linguistic approach. Oruka understands the hermeneutic trend as involving 'the philosophical analysis of concepts in a given African language to help clarify meaning and logical implications arising from the use of such concepts' (ibid. 11). The main proponents of this school include the Ghanaian philosophers Kwasi Wiredu (1987) and Kwame Gyekye (1995, 1997), and Barry Hallen and his late co-author John Olubi Sodipo (1986), from the United States of America and Nigeria, respectively. The artistic or literary trend applies to African intellectual figures in the humanities who address themselves to themes basic to Africa's cultural identity. The main proponents include the Ugandan poet and social critic Okot p'Bitek, Kenyan writer and social critic Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Nigerian playwright, poet, and social critic Wole Soyinka.

philosophy. Tempels is a non-African by birth, but I have decided to treat him, especially in this context, as a great and genuine contributor to African philosophy. This provokes a question: can we consider the works of non-Africans by birth as forming part of African philosophy?

Hountondji (1983) makes some interesting claims, advocating the exclusion of the works of non-Africans such as Tempels from the list of genuine contributors to the history of African philosophy. Hountondji accepts only the geographical and political meanings of the term—so that, in his view, African philosophy is a philosophy produced by anybody of African descent or nationality. He links philosophy to the geographical origins of the authors when he thinks that the texts must be written by Africans (Hountondji 1983:33). He argues:

> The Africanness of our philosophy will not necessarily reside in its themes but will depend above all on the geographical origin of those who produce it and their intellectual coming together. The best European Africanists remain Europeans, even (and above all) if they invent a Bantu 'philosophy', whereas the African philosophers who think in terms of Plato or Marx and confidently take over the theoretical heritage of Western philosophy, assimilating and transcending it, are producing authentic African work. (Hountondji 1983:53–54)

From the quotation above, Hountondji implies that Tempels is not an African philosopher. Hountondji 'broadens' the horizons of African philosophical literature when he suggests the inclusion of all the research into Western philosophy carried out by Africans:

> This broadening of the horizon implies no contradiction: just as the writings of Western anthropologists on African societies belong to Western scientific literature, so the philosophical writings of Africans on the history of Western thought are an integral part of African philosophical literature. So, obviously, African philosophical works concerning problems that are not specially related to African experience should also be included. In this sense, the articles by the Ghanaian J.E. Wiredu on Kant, on material implication and the concept of truth, are an integral part of African

philosophy, as are the analyses of the concept of freedom or the notion of freewill by the Kenyan Henry Odera or the Nigerian D.E. Idoniboye. (Hountondji1983: 65)[19]

Why does Hountondji reject the inclusion of Africanist philosophical literature as forming part of African philosophy? Would it not be more profitable to 'fuse horizons' and, in so doing, create a common framework for the hermeneutical practice, as Gadamer (1965) would have it? According to Gadamer, our understanding occurs on the basis of our history, which in turn has an impact on our consciousness in a given situation or 'horizon'. Nevertheless, understanding is not confined within the horizon of its situation. The horizon of understanding is not static but changing and always subject to the effects of history. In an era marked by globalization, where mobility and migration are increasingly determining factors, traditional specificities of place and belonging have been eroded by virtualization. This challenges us to form new contexts of meaning that can foster the integration of the things we may consider abnormal. Place and belonging become what we make of them through constructs of meaning and through the construction of community. This reminds us of the 'placelessly local' or the 'locally placeless', the apt formula (literally utopian in the sense of nowhere-ness) that the Indian-German philosopher Ram Adhar Mall(1995) puts at the centre of intercultural philosophy. I think Hountondji endorses the Western form of valid academic knowledge but does not consider a methodology of constructing valid transcultural knowledge.

Hountondji's position is understandably the modernist one that conceives geography or space as something fixed, immobile, nondialectical—a form of Cartesian cartography of spatial science (Foucault 1980: 176). The problem stems from the usage of the adjective 'African' to qualify philosophy. A frequent tendency is to limit the term to the continent that has for many centuries been designated by the name 'Africa'. On this account, 'African' is a purely geographic expression. Nevertheless, we can also broaden the adjective 'African' to designate cultural, historical, political, ideological, and social realities.

Tempels lived and was socially involved in the daily lives of the Baluba. His openness and experiences as 'being-in-the-world' (Heidegger) enabled him to negotiate a new and meaningful identity with that of his Baluba friends. Their mode of existence became his

[19] Hountondji thinks we can add Ghanaian philosopher Anton-Wilhelm Amo, who studied and taught in German universities such as Halle, Wittenberg, and Jena during the first half of the 18th century, before returning to his home country where he died.

mode of being (Merleau-Ponty). In addition, the South African freedom fighter Robert Sobukwe defines an African as anybody who considers Africa his or her home. Many Africanists have agreed that Africa is their home, and I know of many missionaries who insisted on being buried on African soil. While thinkers such as Wiredu and Oruka contest this obviously narrow definition, the majority of African thinkers do not find it in any way aberrant to consider Tempels as the father of contemporary African philosophy. Oruka (1990) does not see any reason why the work by an African thinker or in the African intellectual context in any branch of philosophy should not be seen as part of African philosophy. Oruka's work *Claude Sumner as an African Philosopher* aims at defending the view that Claude Sumner, a born Canadian, is an African philosopher (Graness &Kresse 1997:265).

The widespread agreement on the status of Tempels as an African philosopher indicates a tacit consensus on this point. A non-African by birth who has lived in Africa and developed interests in the daily lives of Africans could produce a philosophical work that could be regarded as African. In this connection, Mudimbe and Appiah are African philosophers but with cosmopolitan frames of mind. They are citizens of the world, and they tend to free themselves from any African ideas or attachments and rather are interested in many cultures. For Mudimbe, it is culture rather than birthright that determines the identity of an individual's scholarship. However, such a construction of self through 'the liberation of difference' (van Binsbergen 2005), is just textual and not of substance. Van Binsbergen associates Mudimbe with the metaphor of 'homelessness', as Mudimbe does not ostentatiously cherish any African roots. This homelessness is not just physical but intellectual. Instead, Mudimbe aligns with Appiah, another cosmopolitan African philosopher 'who has endeared himself to the North Atlantic audience by rejecting the essentialism of Africanness'. Van Binsbergen explains:

> Mudimbe does not explicitly, and univocally, choose a constituency in Africa among the African masses and their cultural, political and religious expressions; neither does he consistently choose a disciplinary constituency in North Atlantic academic life, apart from the lack of methodological and theoretical constraint which the literary form of the kaleidoscopic, collage-like essay accords him. (ibid.)[20]

[20]Van Binsbergen (2005:20).This homelessness is also reflected in Mudimbe's spiritual life. Over 40 years after he dropped out of the Benedictine Order, his main identity is still that of a Roman Catholic cleric: dressing in

Mudimbe prefers to analyse other people's tales, parables, fables, ideas, and inventions, but for his personal needs retreats to the bare and windy rocks of agnosticism. His Africa is not that of other people; it does not exist as a tangible reality for himself but at best constitutes a context for contestation, a laboratory for the politics of the liberation of difference.

Even though Mudimbe and Appiah are Africans, they see the whole idea of having an identity as a project. Identity is not fixed but evolutive.[21] This explains why, from an intercultural philosophical perspective, philosophy in Africa should entail venturing beyond one's own chosen boundaries, regardless of whether such boundaries are defined in a geographical, an identitary, a disciplinary, or a logico-conceptual sense. The new home is nowhere, the new boundary is situational and constructed, and the new identity is performative.

It would be beneficial for the African philosopher today to go beyond the realm of essentialist identity. It is in such a pendulum swing of movement between African essentialism and globalizing or universalizing detachment that I place Mudimbe and Appiah. Nevertheless, they need to have substantial African rhizomes. Similar problems are not absent in other traditions of philosophy. Bartholomew de las Casas enjoys pride of place in Latin American philosophy, while European philosophy includes a host of non-Europeans in its corpus, including Plotinus (Egyptian/African), Augustine (Tagatse/African), Avicenna (Iranian/Persian), and Averroes (Arab). One major reason for the inclusion of these non-Westerners in the history of Western philosophy is that their philosophic thought is connected with, or has had some influence upon, the development of European philosophy.

Furthermore, Bodunrin (1981) reminds us that some of the most influential figures in British philosophy, such as Wittgenstein and Popper, were not even British by birth! Similarly, Alfred North Whitehead was born in England, but his later philosophical work belongs to the history of American philosophy. In the same vein, the late Malawian philosopher, Didier Njirayamanda Kaphagawani (1987) thinks that the works of some non-African philosophers working in Africa, such as those of Francis Gillies and Gordon Hunnings, should also qualify as African professional philosophy.

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black, cultivating visits to Catholic monasteries and priests with whom he shared a biography, and even reading his breviary for an hour everyday—the trappings of Roman Catholic priesthood without being a member.

[21] Ceton (2005).

The thoughts of the ancient Greeks belong to the history of Western philosophy, but the ancient Greeks and ancient Britons were mutually ignorant of each other. Wiredu (1974) posits that the intellectual history of humanity is a series of borrowings and adaptations among races, nations, tribes, and even smaller sub-groups. Consequently, the work of a philosopher is part of a given tradition if it is either produced within the context of that tradition or taken up and used in it. The tendency, therefore, to exclude non-Africans *by birth* as genuine contributors while at the same time accepting the North Atlantic academic terms of philosophical discourse as givens is quite problematic and unrealistic.

In contemporary global society, there is a drifting in space, and identity is socially constructed. Geography and space are no longer autonomous, predictable, isolated, and fixed identities, but rather are defined by the 'plane of contest' and interconnectedness. This invites us to go beyond the closed, territorial way of existence to an open, global mode of existence. Being African has to do with belonging and taking responsibility, which I think Tempels did! To make Africa home means to belong to a particular place in Africa and to care about its daily problems. The vigorous participation of people like Tempels in the African family today should be welcomed rather than tolerated.[22] Thus, Hountondji needs to think twice about the 'African by birth'criterion as a condition *sine qua non* for inclusion in the history of African philosophy. We need both the born Africans and the Africans by choice in our move towards a new African philosophy.

1.7. Nationalist–ideological philosophy

Oruka's second type of philosophy is 'nationalist–ideological philosophy'. This refers to the works of modern African political nationalists such as the former Zambian president Kenneth Kaunda, the former Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere (1922–1999), and the former Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah (1909–1972). It is basically political philosophy and is found in manifestos, pamphlets, and discourse related to the anti-colonial struggle for liberation. It mostly refers to the political thoughts of post-independence African leaders, but it can also refer more generally to radical political thought. These thinkers assume that communalism, as the supposed basic tenet of traditional Africa, should form the cardinal principle of any sound ideology for modern Africa.

[22] In this light, Sanya Osha (2003a, 2005), for example, considers Wim van Binsbergen (since 2002 the editor of *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy/Revue Africaine de Philosophie*)as an African philosopher.

The Nigerian philosopher Sanya Osha (2006) posits that the birth of African philosophy was wrought from highly political circumstances which have continued to have three profound implications. The first tendency within the discipline had to confront the need for liberation and, as such, was based on a discourse that emerged from polemic and overt political rhetoric. The second tendency strove for the discursive detachment and theoreticism of Western academic philosophy. The third tendency emerged from the sustained critique of ethnophilosophy. The Congolese philosopher Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba says that African philosophy should be:

> the struggle of the complete liberation of the entire African people […] the struggle to destroy every form of exploitation of man by man, of African nations by other nations […]. (Wamba-dia-Wamba 1991:224)

He then goes on to say that an African philosophy department which teaches only Western philosophy is 'principally an oppressive, and thus pro-imperialist, structure' (ibid. 240).

1.8. Professional philosophy

The professional philosophy trend is opposed to ethnophilosophy but not to the nationalist–ideological trend. This is a critical approach used by scholars who have undergone university training in philosophy as a discipline and who have published on various themes. Advocates of professional philosophy are united in their opposition to ethnophilosophy and in their affirmation of the centrality of critical rationality in the activity of philosophy.[23] There are differences of emphasis among them, however, about the importance of African philosophy's 'relevance' to independence and development.

1.9. Philosophic sagacity or sage philosophy

The fourth trend in this list, which is the focus of Oruka's own distinguished work and this dissertation, is 'philosophic sagacity' or 'sage philosophy'. This was introduced to the debate on African philosophy during the Dr William Amo Conference in Accra, July 1978. In order

[23] See, for example, Wiredu (1980, 1990); Hountondji (1996).

to define philosophic sagacity, it is necessary to explain what sage philosophy is about. According to Oruka:

> Sage philosophy consists of the expressed thoughts of wise men and women in any given community and is a way of thinking and explaining the world that fluctuates between *popular wisdom* (well-known communal maxims, aphorisms and general common sense truths) and *didactic wisdom* (an expounded wisdom and a rational thought of some given individuals within a community). While popular wisdom is conformist, didactic wisdom is at times critical of the communal set-up and popular wisdom. Thoughts can be expressed in writing or as unwritten sayings and arguments associated with some individual(s). (Oruka 1991:33-34)

Some of Oruka's critics have disparagingly called his sage philosophy 'culture philosophy', suggesting that it cannot be distinguished from ethnophilosophy. Oruka makes it clear, however, that his aim is to

> [...] invalidate the claim the traditional African peoples were innocent of logical and critical thinking' and thus also the belief that 'traditional African philosophy does not go beyond folk-wisdom and non-critical thought. (Oruka 1987: 51-52)

Serequeberhan sees sage philosophy as Oruka's attempt to carve out a middle way between ethnophilosophy and professional philosophy, and describes it as the thought of indigenous wise men 'who critically engage the established tradition and culture of their respective ethnic groups and/or societies' (Serequeberhan 1991a:19). These sages, says Serequeberhan, occupy a critical space in their culture; they are not merely preservers of tradition.

Practitioners of this fourth trend attempt to extract the philosophical wisdom from these sages through dialogue. After conducting interviews with his sages in Kenya, Oruka identifies two main categories of sage philosophy (Oruka 1991):

1) First of all, there is the folk sage, who is well versed in the popular wisdom, culture, and beliefs of his people. He is essentially a conformist in relation to the communal set-up. He is a folk sage because he does not transcend the celebrated folk wisdom of his

people. He remains at the first order of sage philosophy, which is popular wisdom and includes all the accepted customary and conventional beliefs and practices of the people.

2) The philosophic sage individually expresses rational thoughts and moral teachings. Such a sage is at times critical of the culture, beliefs, and popular wisdom of his people. He is able to reflect on and evaluate what prevails and is commonly accepted in the first order. Such a sage is an exponent of second-order philosophy,[24] which is didactic wisdom. This second-order philosophy is what is referred to as philosophic sagacity.

Philosophic sagacity is the reflection of a person who is a sage and a thinker. As a sage, a person is—as already pointed out—well versed in the wisdoms and traditions of his people. As a thinker, he is critical and transcends the communal wisdom. Philosophic sagacity, therefore, is the expounded and well-reasoned thought of some individuals in a given culture.

In searching for philosophic sagacity, traditional individual African sages are identified and dialogue is carried out with them orally. Traditional Africa here refers to an era when the dominance of beliefs and practices in an African setting, as shown by the sages who represent a domain or sphere of life, was constituted prior to the penetration by North Atlantic and/or global post-17th-century technology, a domain that has managed to more or less survive as a relatively autonomous, relatively intact domain of thought and action ever since. It is against this background that Oruka postulates the main argument for philosophic sagacity.

Philosophic sagacity maintains that African philosophy in its pure traditional form does not begin and end in a folk talk and consensus. It maintains that Africans, even without outside influence, are not strangers to logical and dialectical, critical inquiry. Philosophic sagacity proceeds on the supposition that the ability to read and write is not a necessary condition for philosophical reflection and exposition. Oruka's project demonstrates that one is likely to find indigenous thinkers who are illiterate. They are critical, independent thinkers who oversee their thoughts and opinions by the power of reason and innate ingenuity rather than by the influence of community wisdom. They are capable of taking a problem or concept and offering a more or less rigorous philosophical explanation of it, thereby making clear rationally where they accept or reject the communal judgement on the matter. Oruka is so thrilled by the idea that he declares:

[24] This categorization made by Oruka should not be confused with the philosophy journal of that name.

> Writing is not a great issue. Writing is a good way to store thought and so to store philosophy. But writing is not thinking and Philosophy is thinking and one can think even if one is incapable or has no facilities for writing. (Oruka 1991:6)[25]

1.10. Hermeneutical philosophy

Oruka later acknowledged the emergence of a fifth model of African philosophy, namely 'hermeneutical philosophy'. Hermeneutics is a development in European/North Atlantic philosophy, seeking to explain the meaning implied in expressions, symbols, texts, and human phenomena in general, by vicariously articulating what they mean for the actors who originally produced them. Hermeneutic interpretation seeks to probe the 'silences', to uncover a deeper meaning, perhaps masked and hidden, but waiting to be discovered. The hermeneutic tradition could be traced with the German religious philosopher Schleiermacher (c. 1800).[26] These philosophers prefer to concentrate explicitly upon the distinctive 'ideas', worldviews, or priorities that are characteristic of particular historical periods and contexts. In the African context, a starting point for most hermeneutical philosophers in and of Africa is the general conviction that European imperialism and colonialism violently and profoundly disrupted Africa's social, cultural, and political continuity and integrity. One benefit of a hermeneutic approach, as a standard intercultural approach, is that it would render interculturality more meaningful. In contemporary times, there is a mix between the

[25] I think writing is a very important issue and Oruka cannot afford to ignore it. Why are African sage philosophers different from, say, the Pre-Socratics, Descartes, Kant, or Hountondji? The reason is that the former were not embedded in a world of text production and textual accumulation. The Pre-Socratic Greek philosophers, for example, largely operated in an early-literate environment and largely taught orally—though some left texts (e.g. Parmenides), and many of their sayings have been recorded in later traditions (collected by Plato and Aristotle and brought together, especially in modern times, by the German classical scholar Hermann Diels (1848–1922) in *The Fragments of the Presocratics*). Since the mid-20th century, there has been a widespread and profound debate on how literacy and text do violence to the world and to human beings, and how they totally transform the experience of reality. Advocates of literacy, such as Jack Goody, Walter Ong, and Eric Havelock, stress the impact that the shift from orality to literacy has had on culture and education. Writing brought about the major transformation of the ancient Near East: the state, organized religion, and proto-science. Oruka seems to have ignored these debates, which were already being staged extensively when he wrote in the 1980s–1990s. Even among African philosophers, Oruka's stance on this issue has been contested by Bodunrin, Hountondji, and Keita. We will return to this in Chapter 5.

[26] Some major figures in Western (notably Continental European) philosophy linked to or identified with this tradition include Heidegger, Gadamer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Ricoeur.

indigenous African and the rest of the world. However, this meeting is characterized by North Atlantic hegemony. The hermeneutic approach to African philosophy could help us single out what aspects or elements of the mixture are to be valued and re-affirmed as a sound basis for a progressive African social, political, and cultural heritage.[27] Okonda Okolo observes:

> The interest in hermeneutics arises out of the reality of […] a generalized identity crisis due to the presence of a culture—a foreign and dominating tradition—and the necessity for a self-affirmation in the construction of an authentic culture and tradition. (Okolo 1991:201)

Serequeberhan observes:

> It is no accident that the discussion of African philosophy is taking place in the context of the increasing contemporary importance of hermeneutics, deconstruction, and […] context-oriented modes of doing philosophy in the discipline at large. (Serequeberhan 1991a:14)

This type is evident in Outlaw's call for African philosophers to deconstruct the colonial heritage by 'de-colonizing the mind' and to reconstruct a shattered indigenous African heritage (Outlaw1987b: 11). It is apparent at any rate that the hermeneutical and deconstructive trends in African philosophy draw heavily upon similar trends in Western philosophy.

Deconstruction is a post-modern method of analysis, derived principally from the works of French philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean-Francois Lyotard. Its goal is to undo all constructions and assumptions in a bid to reveal the arbitrary and internal presuppositions of the text. Deconstruction employs a text's own stratagems against it, producing a force of dislocation that spreads itself throughout the entire system, fissuring it in every direction and thoroughly delimiting it. Deconstruction attempts to undo, reverse, displace, and resituate the hierarchies involved in polar opposites such as object/subject, right/wrong, good/bad, pragmatic/principled. As a method of post-modernist

[27] For more African advocates of a hermeneutical approach in African philosophy, we may cite Nigerian philosopher Theophilus Okere, Congolese philosopher Okonda Okolo, and Eritrean philosopher Tsenay Serequeberhan.

epistemology, deconstruction is avowedly, intentionally, and intensely subjectivist and anti-objectivist. It hesitates to dismiss any perspective as entirely without interest. It precludes universal knowledge or global theory because it is itself an anti-theoretical enterprise. In this light, interpretation is intertextual rather than causal, with much suspicion of reason and rationality.

1.11. Other approaches in contemporary African philosophy

Mudimbe speaks of three main approaches in current African philosophical practice. First is the critique of ethnophilosophy, a critique which draws upon the Western philosophical tradition's view of appropriate philosophical practice. The second is the 'foundational' approach, which questions the epistemological foundations of the human and social sciences. The third approach includes philological studies, critical anthropology, and hermeneutics. The Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye distinguishes between traditional and modern African philosophy, while other African philosophers such as Sodipo and the Congolese philosopher Tshiamalenga simply distinguish between professional and traditional African philosophy.

If one examines the discussion surrounding the various types or models of African philosophy mentioned so far, one recurring issue that emerges is whether philosophy is to be construed primarily as 'professional philosophy', and thus ultimately along the lines of the institution of Western philosophy during the last millennium, or to be construed contextually as some form of culture philosophy. In addition to those who think of philosophy contextually, there are some whose effort is directed towards making explicit the worldviews of traditional cultures, while others are more concerned that philosophy be relevant to issues of independence, modernization, and development (Nkrumah 1970). Perhaps a better way of stating the problem is in these two pertinent questions:

> 1) Is philosophy the product of a universal human reason or is every philosophy primarily an expression of the culture which produces it?
> 2) Could the meeting of African philosophy and the other philosophical traditions all over the globe not produce novel and promising directions for philosophy as a whole?

The heart of the matter is that, for a long time, African philosophy, as displayed by academic African/Africanist philosophers, was largely dependent on the so-called

mainstream Western philosophical establishment. Their use of categories and conceptual systems in a non-Western context like Africa still depended on Western epistemological orders, with indifference towards indigenous African philosophy. Mudimbe claims that even those that professed to be 'Afrocentric' in their representations, consciously or unconsciously still referred to the same Western epistemological orders. Such descriptions are as much products of Western cultural priorities and prejudices as anything African. The power/knowledge system (Foucault) of colonialism propagandized Western civilization, philosophy included, as the cultural paradigm. Africa was constructed as the 'Other', and most things African were viewed as negations of that paradigm (Mudimbe 1988).

Even though Oruka, in his sage philosophy project, implicitly intends to counter the Eurocentric bias against traditional African thought, he does not explicitly interrogate Western images of Africa nor challenge their hegemony. His modernist position in the project is a propagation, however indirect, of Western hegemony in African studies/philosophy.[28] Oruka's philosophical position and aesthetic style is rooted in the modernist Enlightenment and its belief in reason, and in the idea that man can decisively shape the world, that history is progress, that logical, rational thought can penetrate all mystery, and that there are no murky depths of existence that cannot thus be illuminated. Some modernist scholars are looking for *absolute knowledge* in science. They believe that science is objective, universal, and rational. Early Enlightenment ideals involved rational enquiry as the guiding principle for all knowledge, and the belief that only progress in intellectual method could bring about a world of order, security, and social understanding. Scholars associated with this tradition include the philosophers Kant and Voltaire. The flipside to this position is that, in believing that their values should be universally applied, Enlightenment thinkers tended to see Europe as the most enlightened and civilized part of the world. Hegel, for example, thought it was morally permissible to colonize non-Western peoples.

Oruka's tendentious dependence on the Western epistemological order is defensible from the modernist position described above. However, the modernist position in itself is in serious doubt from the post-modern standpoint and from existential critiques. Post-modernism has developed since the 1950s and embraces the relativism of a sophist like Protagoras and even Aristotle. For the post-modernist, knowledge claims are not absolute or universal, but they exist in relation to specific discourses. The French post-modern

[28] Oruka (1991) provides as a sub-title: 'Indigenous Thinkers and *Modern* Debate on African Philosophy' [my italics].

philosopher Jean- Francois Lyotard (1924–1998) argues that knowledge can be legitimated only by reference to the scientific language-game in which it is made.[29] For Derrida (1976), there is no such thing as a truth in itself, as truth is plural. The post-modern position rejects modern theory and recognizes a situation where a multitude of theories exists and none is superior to any other. Post-modernists reject modernism's 'grand' narrative, meta (master) narratives *à la* Lyotard, and narratives that claim to be scientific, objective, and universal, that serve to legitimate modernity and assume justice, truth, theory, hegemony. In addition, existentialist critiques of modernism agree with Western Marxists that Enlightenment heritage is totalitarian and dominating. The German philosophers Horkheimer and Adorno remind us of the dangers contained in a Faustian celebration of science without humanity or morality (Horkheimer &Adorno 2002). In common with German philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), post-modernists share scepticism about the possibility of truth, reason, and moral universals, a conviction that terms like 'good' and 'bad' are inappropriate and an insistence that subjective and conflicting interpretations are the closest humans can come to 'understanding'.[30] While aware of the hegemonic tendencies in the use of science, American philosopher Sandra Harding has no option but to admit that all of science is a mere myth, an ethnoscience, but that some of its methods do warrant science's pretence to objectivity, rationality, and validity (Harding 1994,1997).

However, could this imply that African worldviews and African ways of thinking cannot be carefully thought out and made explicit within what we could term the framework of their own rationality? (Mudimbe 1988). Mudimbe's question aims at exposing and, if possible, avoiding some silent dependence on a Western *episteme*. He proposes knowledge from:

[29] Lyotard explicitly draws inspiration from Wittgenstein's language-game in elaborating his own idea of 'Grand' narrative in his book *The Postmodern Condition.* According to Austrian-born British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), language-game refers to the context in which an utterance is made, which determines the purposes served by the utterance and therefore its meaning. Wittgenstein thought that philosophical problems are due to ignoring the 'game' in which certain ideas are used. He conceives of a plurality of language-games and tries to show the different activities language users engage in. Lyotard applies this notion mainly in his analyses of power, authority, and legitimation.

[30] Further discussion of post-modernism and its criticisms of modernism is found in Chapter 5 of this work.

> [...] a wider authority: intellectuals' discourses as a critical library and, if I could, the experience of rejected forms of wisdom which are not part of the structures of political power and scientific knowledge. (Mudimbe1988: x-xi)

Modern science ought to consider itself as a knowledge system among other knowledge systems, which each contain their respective criteria of truth and claims of validity. I submit that in contemporary times, characterized by globalization, a more satisfactory way to deal with African philosophy is the method that has been developed in intercultural philosophical studies. This will provide us with insights and information about traditions of knowledge and intellectual practice elsewhere in the world, in social contexts very different from our own. This will involve taking African and other globally available knowledge traditions seriously in a bid to flavour and augment each knowledge tradition.

1.12. Intercultural philosophy

This is the point where I wish to introduce a particularly inspiring and courageous approach to many of the problems discussed above—an approach that in many ways I consider a way out of the dilemmas and aporias otherwise insurmountable. This is the approach of the Dutch philosopher, anthropologist, and protohistorian Wim van Binsbergen, who, after a splendid career in the social sciences with professorships in major European and African centres of learning, in 1998 acceded to the chair of Foundations of Intercultural Philosophy at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. Wim van Binsbergen's conception of intercultural philosophy comes from his explorations as an anthropologist and oral historian. It operates at the borderline between anthropology and philosophy, even though occasionally it spills over into *belles lettres*, ancient history, and comparative cultural and religious studies. The modernist philosopher may raise eyebrows at such an eclectic approach, as one deviating from the conventions of the discipline. The post-modernists, on the contrary, question any possibility of rigid disciplinary boundaries between the natural sciences, humanities, social sciences, art and literature, culture and life, fiction and theory, image and reality in nearly every field of human endeavour. They consider conventional tight definitions and categorizations of academic disciplines in the university context to be simply remnants of modernity. Michel Foucault (1926–1984) is an example of the cross-disciplinary character of post-modernism. He was at once a philosopher, historian, social theorist, and political scientist. Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) was a philosopher, art critic, and architectural

consultant. Senghor was a philosopher, poet, and statesman. Mudimbe, sometime professor of anthropology, language(s), and literature at Duke and Stanford Universities, would justifiably protest at being typed simply as a 'philosopher'. This is because he also approaches philosophy as a historian of ideas and literature and therefore writes about it from outside its confines more than he does from within (Hallen 2009:61).

Intercultural philosophy investigates as its central theme interculturality.[31] It is that branch of philosophy that was explicitly established in order to address the globalization of difference. This explains the theory of interculturality: using philosophy to critique anthropology and anthropology to critique philosophy. Intercultural philosophy seeks to develop a discourse that will allow for a discussion of all philosophical problems from an intercultural perspective. It does this by a theoretical reflection on concepts like culture, cultural diversity, cultural relativism, multiculturality, power, hermeneutics, and dialogue. Intercultural philosophy, with the use of such concepts, critically explores the conditions under which we can talk of interculturality. It seeks to prevent any philosophical position from assuming an absolute position. The central idea that runs across the views of authors like Kimmerle, Mall, Lohmar, and Wimmer, as far as intercultural philosophy is concerned, is that there are many philosophical traditions of significance in all regions of the world, rather than just a few or one. They posit that the meeting of different cultural orientations and philosophical tendencies calls for an intensive and qualified discourse on the part of all concerned.

Hence, in its general sense, such 'intercultural philosophy' as conceived by Mall, of an earlier vintage than van Binsbergen, explores the circumstances under which an interchange between distinct 'cultures' can take place, notably to give and receive in different situations and aspects, such as knowledge production of one culture about another, tolerance or intolerance, and conflict or co-operation in the economic, social, and political domain.[32] Mall's approach is similar to a comparative-approach philosophy (which is tantamount to studying the similarities and differences between different 'cultures'), and this could foster relativism in philosophy. In this case, there would be no mutual exchange and enrichment, as this approach could not really help the self-understanding and practice of philosophy itself. Intercultural philosophy is not specifically devoted to the comparison of the world's major

[31] See, for example, Mall & Lohmar (1993); Mall (1995); Kimmerle & Wimmer (1997); van Binsbergen (2003). I have benefitted from discussions and translations of the works of Kimmerle and Mall from van Binsbergen (1999, 2003).

[32] See Mall (1995), Chapter 1; Mall (1993).

philosophical traditions (African, Chinese, Indian, European, Jewish, and Islamic). Instead, it envisages an abstract and formal, rather than substantive, investigation for interculturality. Doing intercultural philosophy would entail putting into contrast, rather than merely comparing, different philosophical traditions. The Chinese intercultural philosopher Vincent Shen (2010) understands 'contrast' as the rhythmic interplay between difference and complementarity, discontinuity and continuity, which pave the way for real mutual enrichment between the different traditions of philosophy.

We must admit that the term intercultural philosophy existed before van Binsbergen succeeded to the German intercultural philosopher Heinz Kimmerle's chair of that designation; however, van Binsbergen re-defined the concept. In his attempt to re-define intercultural philosophy in a more specific form, van Binsbergen does not endorse mere philosophical pluralism. He goes further and investigates, specifically, how the philosophical traditions relate with one another, how it is possible (or impossible) for them to create valid knowledge about one another and about the life-worlds that each of these philosophical traditions builds for their adherents. He argues:

> In a more specific form [...], we would conceive of intercultural philosophy as the search for a *philosophical intermediate position* where specialist philosophical thought seeks to escape from its presumed determination by any specific distinct 'culture'. […] we render explicit the traditions of thought peculiar to a number of cultures, and we subsequently explore the possibilities of cross-fertilization between these traditions of thought.(van Binsbergen 2003:468-469)

In summary, we need to distance ourselves from the comparative- philosophy approach to interculturality because such an approach would retain the concept of culture as holistic and bounded. This would mean that many distinct 'cultures' exist side by side. Wholeness and boundedness would assume an existential cultural identity that is claimed to be the opposite of performativity. Yet, the concept of culture is performative. Performativity implies that culture is not fixed but flexible and based on changing experiences or contextual considerations. This can be explained in the sense that human beings in their daily lives have several overlapping 'cultural orientations', which co-exist and from which they learn daily, and not just one 'culture' that combines claims of totality, integration, and boundedness. The erroneous notion that 'culture' is bounded and holistic implicitly produces the illusion of fixed unchanging truths and intolerance to diversity.

The difference between intercultural philosophy and comparative philosophy, as defined by van Binsbergen, is somehow limited or narrow. I think van Binsbergen could have defined this difference more broadly. He defines intercultural philosophy primarily as philosophizing about the possibilities and limitations of interculturality. This position leaves undefined the geographical, cultural, class, and historical locus in which to conduct such philosophizing. Van Binsbergen's locus is that of a renegade post-North Atlantic ethnographer turned Nkoya prince and *sangoma*[33]in Zambia, thus creating a locus that did not exist before. His position is essentially different from his Rotterdam predecessor, Heinz Kimmerle, who does not think of the possibility of thinking through a culture outside a specific cultural embedding or dream of cultural interstices, where the 'in-between' may situate itself. Moreover, van Binsbergen's approach is also different from the nostalgic essentializing position evinced by the South African philosopher Mogobe Ramose and his Nigerian colleague, Tunde Bewaji, in their conception of an *ubuntu* philosophy.[34] These two examples could have helped van Binsbergen define his conception of intercultural philosophy much more broadly.

Intercultural philosophy attempts answers to questions such as the following:

- What is culture? Is it possible to speak of a plurality of cultures?
- How can we think diversity and unity at the global scale?
- How is such thinking to be informed by a re-thought concept of culture, one that is capable of dealing with both diversity and unity at the global scale?
- How can we conceive the situation and the process of interculturality?
- Is it possible to produce valid knowledge across cultural boundaries?
- How may we approach the apparently irrational beliefs of those not sharing our own cultural orientation?
- How can we overcome the obvious difference, inequalities and historical grievances between continents, nations, etc?

[33]*Sangoma* is a term for a diviner-priest in the tradition of the Nguni-speaking peoples (Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele, and Swazi) of southern Africa. Characteristically, they are specialists in the dynamics of collective healing at the level of the kin group and local community in southernAfrica. Van Binsbergen became a *sangoma* during his religious anthropological fieldwork. He argues that *sangomahood* is a source of valid knowledge and is translatable to a global format. For more on *sangomahood*, see van Binsbergen (2003, 2007).

[34] We will come back to *ubuntu* philosophy in Chapters 2 and 7. For more on *ubuntu,* see Samkange & Samkange (1980); Ramose (1999); and Boele van Hensbroek (ed.) (2001b).

1.13. Research questions and hypotheses

Against the background of the various models of African philosophy posited above, this work attempts to provide answers to the following questions:

1) How can we renew the dynamics in African philosophy, whose stagnation has been caused by a sterile debate on ethnophilosophy?
2) What is the best approach for contemporary African philosophy to take in a context marked by the high degree of global interconnectedness and interactions today?
3) Is there only one philosophical orientation, or are there many to jointly help shape the future of the discipline?

These questions lead on to two ideas that will guide us through much of the argument of this thesis. First; there is the idea that Oruka's philosophic sagacity is an innovation in African philosophy. He brings out a system of knowledge outside the North Atlantic one, thereby trying to take away the claim that North Atlantic science is the only valid system of knowledge.

Second, we need to go beyond Oruka's conception of philosophic sagacity in our search for a valid and reliable form of an African philosophy in contemporary times. Such a conception of philosophic sagacity is one which can influence and be influenced by other philosophical traditions all over the world. Van Binsbergen (2003) substantiates this claim with a critical evaluation of *sangomahood* as a form of indigenous African wisdom that can better fit the present globalized, intercultural world. This explains our inclusion of an intercultural philosophy which—or so we hope—is not only theoretically and conceptually sophisticated, but also empirically accountable[35] and politically responsible. Intercultural philosophy enables us to go beyond the particularism of the ethnophilosophers and the universalism of the professional philosophers. It also alerts us on, and helps us deconstruct the hegemonic imposition of the North Atlantic model.

[35] As an attempt to develop an intersubjective language to formulate an ontology of the present, philosophy is much more an empirical science than is commonly admitted.

1.14. Methodology

Our methodology throughout this thesis will be a comparative analysis of the writings of Oruka and intercultural philosophers such as Wim van Binsbergen, against the background of a more general assessment of the state-of-the-art in African philosophy. In the process, we will make explicit, and critically examine, the concepts and theories these authors deploy as central elements in their philosophies. We will seek to purify these concepts and theories from whatever one-sidedness or other shortcomings they may have in these authors' own works and selectively forge them into some tools towards a new orientation in contemporary African philosophy.

1.15. Relevance of the general debates on philosophic sagacity

In this section, I present some of the views of scholars on Oruka's conception of philosophic sagacity and the main points they raise. As a trend in African philosophy, literature on philosophic sagacity is as bountiful as the perspectives and interpretations of it are varied. Bodunrin (1981) maintains, as do Hountondji (1983) and the Sierra Leonean philosopher Lansana Keita (1985), that philosophy cannot develop fully unless it 'writes its memoir' or 'keeps a diary'. These three African philosophers are of the opinion that writing creates an epistemological base for philosophy, and so the oral interviews Oruka carries out with sages cannot be endorsed as serious academic philosophy. Bodunrin goes further, to suggest that philosophic sagacity is similar to French anthropologist Marcel Griaule's Ogotemmêli, who 'displays a great philosophic sagacity in his exposition of the secret doctrines of his group', and to the approach carried out by Barry Hallen and J.O. Sodipo among the Yoruba in Nigeria.

Didier Kaphagawani (1987) judges that philosophic sagacity is a second-order philosophy to ethnophilosophy and, hence, could not exist without the latter. He speaks of a probable (though only apparent) 'misconception' by Oruka in annotating four trends in African philosophy as types, and he later endorses this 'misconception' as valid, as they turn out to be bi-valent: they represent types of African philosophy, on the one hand, and methods of philosophizing in Africa, on the other (Kaphawani 1987). However, Oruka clarifies that philosophic sagacity is rather a second order to culture philosophy. Sages reflect upon culture, not as it is summarized in consensus form and analysed by professional philosophers, theologians, or missionaries (as in ethnophilosophy), but based on their personal experiences in the community.

For Lucius Outlaw (1987b), philosophic sagacity invalidates the pernicious myth that African peoples are of a decidedly primitive mentality and permits the recognition of the existence of philosophy in traditional Africa. His stance forcefully argues that the debates on African philosophy serve as a timely deconstructive critique of philosophy, marking the death of an ageing and decadent mode of thinking in Western intellectual circles. It is in this regard that German philosopher Christian Neugebauer (1987) highlights the historical background to the myth of primitive mentality in Western intellectual circles. He asserts that philosophic sagacity is out to criticize and refute European racism, notably that of Hegel and Kant and of their vast and decisive inheritance, which is constitutive of much of modern philosophy.

The Nigerian philosopher and former student of Oruka, Anthony Oseghare (1985), appraises Oruka's philosophic sagacity as a new orientation in African philosophy and so exhorts African philosophers to devote more time to it. Nevertheless, Oseghare is incorrect to claim that before *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy* (1991) and the project of sage philosophy, African philosophy suffered from sterility. Perhaps in certain philosophical circles African philosophy was lacking vitality, but it was certainly not sterile.

Oseghare also makes a distinction between sagacity and knowledge, in a bid to clarify and enhance Oruka's project on who a real sage is. He maintains that both are involved in the acquiring and using of skills, but they are distinct: sagacity includes practical wisdom, which is acquired through experience, and has a wider significance than knowledge. Sagacity could also be wisdom which is limited to common sense and wisdom that goes beyond common sense.

The German philosopher Gerd-Rüdiger Hoffmann (1984), writing from the standpoint of a limited orthodox Marxism, claims that sage philosophy is a bourgeois reflection which tends to isolate philosophy from ideology. To him, philosophy and ideology are identical, and there can be no philosophy in society without classes. Hence, to the extent that sage philosophy is a philosophy rooted in classless peasant African society, it cannot be philosophy but is some form of peasant storytelling. He admits that ancient Greece had a philosophy, but then, he writes, ancient Greece was already a class society (Oruka 1991:7-8).[36]

[36] Cited in Oruka (1991: 7-8). Hoffmann's claim needs some modification. We cannot speak of a classless society where we have peasants. Moreover, there has been a long debate on the class nature of African society, before and after the imposition of colonialism.

The Kenyan philosopher Frederick Ochieng'-Odhiambo (2002a) traces the development of Oruka's thoughts in African philosophy from the early 1970s to the 1990s, a period spanning slightly more than 20 years. Oruka's views on African philosophy in general and philosophic sagacity in particular are demarcated into three stages: pre-1978, 1978–1984, and 1984–1995.[37] The struggle against ethnophilosophy and a search for the best possible definition of African philosophy is what punctuates and characterizes the pre-1978 period. During this period, Oruka is very uncompromising and antagonistic towards ethnophilosophy. He attempts to dislodge ethnophilosophy from African philosophy because it does not constitute philosophy in any proper sense of the term. The second period is the era of philosophic sagacity. It also marks the beginning of a compromise and accommodative stance towards ethnophilosophy in explaining and defining African philosophy. The third stage (post-1984 period) is the sage philosophy era. This period, according to Ochieng'-Odhiambo, witnesses a continued and increased compromising spirit to the extent that the distinction between ethnophilosophy and sage philosophy becomes quite blurred.

However, American philosopher Gail Presbey (2007) does not agree that Oruka had a compromising spirit or ended up embracing ethnophilosophy as Ochieng'-Odhiambo asserts. Sage philosophy, Presbey maintains, is distinct from ethnophilosophy and remains a unique approach within African philosophy. The main differences stem from the fact that Oruka's sages are critical, reflective, rigorous, and dialectical. She also asserts the importance of naming the individual thinkers who share their personal thoughts.[38] In her opinion, one needs both the individual sages and critical evaluation to constitute a sage philosophy project. She also does not see why Oruka does not include the folk sages in his project. This is because, according to Presbey, the folk sages show more philosophical talent than his description would lead us to believe. She also asserts that Oruka's project was not an extraverted discourse (meaning it was not built up essentially *for a European public*)[39] but one that had a focus on practical matters. She presents a list of ways Oruka's sage philosophy project helped several practical matters in his own local community and country at large.

Ochieng'-Odhiambo (2007) traces and articulates the various stages of philosophic sagacity as an approach to African philosophy in academic discourses. He also argues that

[37] Presbey (2007) prefers to call Ochieng'-Odhiambo's distinctions the early, middle, and later Oruka, similar to the way people refer to the early or later Heidegger or Wittgenstein to help scholars know the context of one's remarks.

[38] See also Ochieng'-Odhiambo (2002a) for this distinction.

[39] This is one of the criticisms of ethnophilosophy (Hountondji 1996: 45).

even though it is strongly attached to traditional Africa, it could still be relevant to modern African nation-states. Finally, he tries to figure out the distinction between philosophic sagacity and sage philosophy. He contends that too often some individuals, at times mistakenly, used the two terms interchangeably. For Ochieng'-Odhiambo, Oruka did not use 'sage philosophy' and 'philosophic sagacity' interchangeably even though some scholars have persisted in that erroneous assumption. Oruka, he asserts, made a distinction between two categories of sage philosophy: folk or popular sagacity, and philosophic sagacity. While the folk or popular sagacity articulates the well-known communal maxims, aphorisms, and general common-sense truths, philosophic sagacity expresses the thoughts of wise men and women that transcend popular wisdom and attain a philosophic capacity (Oruka 1991:33-34). Hence, while we can consider all examples of philosophic sagacity as forming part of sage philosophy, not every illustration of sage philosophy constitutes philosophic sagacity. This explains why in Oruka's conception of philosophic sagacity, the folk sagacity dimension of sage philosophy is relegated to the background—since it would be a fall-back to ethnophilosophy, which Orukawanted to avoid at all costs.

Presbey (1997) looks at the various problems that could arise in the implementation of Oruka's sage philosophy project. She highlights some criticisms of the project and presents some examples of the relevance of Oruka's work. Presbey (1999) explores the role of Oruka's sage philosophy within African philosophy and philosophy in general. She raises the larger issue of the relationship of wisdom and philosophy as the heart of the sage philosophy project. She interviews some individual sages in Kenya and attempts an analysis of what they said. In her interviews, the sages reveal that their lives were devoted to the betterment of their communities and their service was to various individuals in that community. Two main aspects arise from this theme, that of individuals living a selfless life for the good of others in the community, and living a life where strong negative emotions are controlled (ibid.95). Presbey recommends that the many wise sages to be found in Africa merit further study by philosophers and others.

Tunde Bewaji (1994) in his review of *Sage Philosophy* posits the entire project as a refreshingly challenging and effective polemic against opponents of philosophic sagacity, against the doctrine of philosophical non-reflectivity of the traditional African mind, and against the idea of pre-logicality or irrationality of traditional African peoples.

The overview of the opinions above shows that Oruka's philosophic sagacity has a place in the modern debate on African philosophy.[40] The modernist context from which Oruka produces sagacity is relevant to the future of the philosophical enterprise in Africa. Nevertheless, where I tend to disagree with these opinions is that they focus on fundamental differences between the North Atlantic and Africa, the regions which are the context of this work. African philosophy, as most of the views above imply, can only be discussed in reference to the North Atlantic paradigm. We need to go beyond that. We need to overcome both centrist universalism and separatist particularism. Both of the extremes are interculturally untenable. Oruka elaborates on African wisdom, but he gives us the impression that this wisdom is limited to Africans in their particular context. Intercultural philosophy allows us to go beyond that context, and I posit that African wisdom can be interculturally relevant and have practical implications.

The hegemonic context in which philosophic sagacity is produced is hardly discussed, and nor is the high degree of global interactions that characterize our contemporary world. Furthermore, the impression inherent in the opinions is that Africa can receive only and not return, with the usual evident signs of Western difference and superiority. This explains why only Western paradigms are used to perpetrate its hegemony. A counter-hegemonic approach would be interculturally rewarding.

In this project, I attempt to go beyond Western constructs with their hegemonic universalist approach; but I do not reside in the ethnocentric trap, and rather look beyond in a bid to foster intercultural dialogue. The ethnocentric trap focuses on an essentialist, unified identity, giving the impression that the self forms a unity onto itself. It interprets identity as an internal, tradition-laden entity that ought to be protected from influences coming from

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[40] *Sagacious Reasoning: Henry Odera Oruka in Memoriam* (1997)is a book edited by Anke Graness and Kai Kresse. This book is a collection of essays by Oruka written between 1972 and 1995 and essays on him by a mixed group of scholars united in their interest in African philosophy and their knowledge of Oruka and his works. The book is dedicated to Oruka. The 'Prologue' is written by Kai Kresse and an 'Epilogue' by Anke Graness. Other contributions are Kwasi Wiredu's 'Remembering H. Odera Oruka'; Sophie Bosede Olowule's 'Oruka's Mission in African Philosophy'; Muyiwa Falaiye's 'Popular Wisdom vs. Didactic Wisdom: Some Comments on Oruka's Philosophic Sagacity'; Frederick Ochieng'-Odhiambo's 'Philosophic Sagacity Revisited'; Dikirr Patrick Maison's 'Sagacity in the Maasai Concept of Death and Immortality'; Oriare Nyarwath's 'Sagacity and Freedom'; Gail Presbey's 'Is Elijah Masinde a Sage? The Dispute between H. Odera Oruka and Chaungo Barasa'; Ulrich Lolke's 'Parental Care as a Principle of Development'; and Dismas Masolo's 'Decentering the Academy: In Memory of a Friend'. See also Godfrey Tangwa's review article (1997).

outside. Ethnocentrism is a pitfall we have to liberate ourselves from because it encourages immutability, whereas one can acquire many more identities in life. Ethnocentrism limits identity to some unchanging object to be handed down from one generation to the next. This is dangerous because it generates only more ethnical, social, and political problems than it pretends to solve.

Intercultural philosophy enables us to acknowledge difference but does not allow us to entrench ourselves in that difference. Humanity surely has a viable survival strategy in intercultural dialogue with those from other cultural orientations. At the epistemological level, there is a need for the contemporary African philosopher to engage in intercultural complementarity and critical collaboration with other philosophical traditions all over the globe. This would foster the construction of African knowledge and lead to insights in African matters of vital importance today. It would necessitate a re-thinking in our search for the expressions and representations of traditional wisdom in Africa and beyond. In this process, a newer vision of African sagacity would emerge, beyond Oruka's, enabling us to explore the possibilities and strategies of intercultural epistemology.

1.16. Outline of the dissertation and overview of chapters

My tentative answers to the questions are provided in the following seven chapters of this thesis, each of which deals with a different but related aspect of philosophic sagacity and intercultural philosophy. The presentation that follows provides an overview of each chapter and indicates how each chapter fits into the overall plan of this work.

The debate on the existence, nature, and identity of African philosophy has been presented in this Chapter 1, *Introduction: African philosophy.* This chapter focuses on the debate about African philosophy among African and Africanist academic philosophers that was sparked off in the 1960s and 1970s and continues to the present. This debate led to the development of two antagonistic camps: the universalists or modernists, and the particularists or traditionalists. The chapter also discusses the various models or trends in African philosophy as conceived by African philosophers such as Oruka and Mudimbe. This discussion goes beyond the debate on African philosophy and postulates the relevance of intercultural philosophy to contemporary African philosophy.

Ethnophilosophy constitutes Chapter 2 of this work. It provides a review of the debate to date on ethnophilosophy from the time the Belgian Franciscan missionary Placide Frans Tempels initiated the ethnophilosophical tendency in philosophico-anthropological studies in

Africa with the publication of his axial work *Bantoe-filosofie /La philosophie bantoue* in 1945. A selection from the main texts of Tempels and the Rwandan Roman Catholic priest Alexis Kagame is presented so that we can highlight their main arguments and impact on contemporary African philosophy.

From ethnophilosophy to philosophic sagacity is the title of Chapter 3. This chapter shows ethnophilosophy as the pivot of contemporary African philosophy. The purpose of Chapters 2 and 3 is to place ethnophilosophy centre stage in the main articulations that follow on the debate on the nature of African philosophy. However, we also examine the main criticisms against ethnophilosophy, especially those of Oruka, in a bid to validate Oruka's rationale for endorsing philosophic sagacity.

Sage philosophy: Basic questions and methodology constitutes Chapter 4. This chapter has a particular focus on Oruka's sage philosophy and the methodology used in investigating it. I attempt to answer two central questions: what is sage philosophy, and how does one distinguish it from the other forms of philosophy that are available in Africa? A brief picture is presented on the continued relevance of wisdom in various traditions. Then there are sketches of, and comments on, the interviews Oruka had with some Kenyan sages. This chapter also provides a historical basis and presents the merits of philosophic sagacity within contemporary African philosophy. The purpose of this chapter is to attempt to provide the rationale for the treatment of philosophic sagacity as a fully-fledged trend in the development of African philosophy.

Re-thinking Henry Odera Oruka's philosophic sagacity in African philosophy is Chapter 5. This chapter brings out the main objections that have been levied against Oruka's sage philosophy project. These objections range from Oruka's own criticisms of the project to methodological and definitional problems. This chapter also uses a different philosophical method and aesthetic style (post-modernism) to go beyond the modernist stance inherent in Oruka's approach. I also submit that a responsible post-modernism might be very useful for African/intercultural philosophy in our global context.

Chapter 6 is entitled *Philosophic sagacity in African philosophy: Propagating the West?* This chapter shows that philosophic sagacity is a subtle propagation of Western hegemony. Oruka does not critically revise the North Atlantic paradigm in his implementation of philosophic sagacity; hence, the Western power/knowledge system has had far-reaching implications for the constitution of knowledge about African realities. Colonialism is presented as a hegemonic project aimed at organizing and transforming non-Europeans areas into fundamentally European constructs. I will then proceed to show how

anthropology was used, as a science, to foster the mercantilist ideology of colonialists and influence Eurocentric prejudices about so-called 'primitive' peoples. I also examine van Binsbergen's experiences and criticisms of anthropology, especially Africanist anthropology. This discipline is contested for its claims for the production of valid intercultural knowledge. The chapter ends by highlighting van Binsbergen's migration from cultural anthropology to intercultural philosophy.

Towards a philosophy of globalization is the title of Chapter 7. In this chapter, I identify globalization as the one of the most important socio-political and cultural developments in our contemporary world that needs philosophical scrutiny. I try to see if Oruka's philosophic sagacity and the orientations of several African philosophers can stand the test of time. This permits me to invite African/intercultural philosophers to think beyond local to global sagacity. I attempt to go beyond their positions by exploding their contentious conception of culture and to see if intercultural communication is possible. This is undertaken with a discussion of intercultural philosophers such as Ram Adhar Mall and Wim van Binsbergen.

Chapter 8 is *The African/intercultural philosopher today: Challenges and perspectives.* In this concluding chapter, I identify the main challenges for the contemporary African/intercultural philosopher. The challenges are enormous but we need to create an intercultural framework in a bid to go beyond borders. I propose an intercultural hermeneutic, couched in counter-hegemonic discourses, a hermeneutic that allows us to cross borders in the way the globalization process makes us understand is necessary.

2

ETHNOPHILOSOPHY

2.1. Introduction

This chapter seeks to present a review of the debate on ethnophilosophy from the time the Belgian Franciscan missionary Placide Frans Tempels initiated the ethnophilosophical tendency in philosophico-anthropological studies in Africa with the publication of his axial work, *Bantoe-filosofie (La philosophie bantoue)* in 1945, and the impact ethnophilosophy has had and continues to have on present-day African philosophy. Even though we have had a brief presentation of this topic in Chapter 1, I still think it necessary to throw more light on the historical background and context of its emergence in a bid to see the problematic it raises. This explains my treatment of the African debate on ethnophilosophy in African philosophy in Chapters 2 and 3 of this work.

It is widely acknowledged that current discussions about African philosophy are in some way a reaction to Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy*.[41] Even though Hountondji and the late Cameroonian philosopher Towa re-defined the term ethnophilosophy in their own way, they did not initially coin the term as it is usually assumed. They rather made their reputation as philosophers for their relentless critiques of ethnophilosophy. Hountondji, for example, is given credit for this term because of his use of the term in his famous article *The Myth of Spontaneous Philosophy* (1974) to refer to works that describe collective African worldviews as philosophy. It is interesting to note that former Ghanaian president and philosopher Kwame Nkrumah had registered for a PhD dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania, United States of America, in 1943 and had proposed to work on what he termed 'ethnophilosophy'.[42]

Hountondji and Towa used the term ethnophilosophy to refer to a cream of thinkers inspired by Tempels. Towa constructed the term ethnophilosophy to classify a group of works which mistakenly, according to him, attribute achievements of philosophy to 'traditional' Africa. This consists in identifying the philosophy of any society with its

[41] For more on the debate on ethnophilosophy see, for example, Towa (1971b); Hountondji (1983); Neugebauer (1987, 1990); Bewaji (1991); Wamba-dia-Wamba (1991); Masolo (1994); Osha (2011).

[42] Osha (2003b: 5-14).

worldview—in the case of Africa, the system of values which can be derived from myths, rites, proverbs, customs, and African culture at large. According to this conception, philosophy is implicit in every traditional society. This can be studied through the cultural elements and the implicit thoughts to be exposed as a collective philosophy.

Towa explains that ethnophilosophy, as an approach, is neither purely philosophical nor ethnological, but ethnophilosophical. The Cameroonian philosopher Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga describes ethnophilosophy as a philosophic work that is close to ethnography. He likens it to an 'exhumed philosophy', a 'tribal philosophy', and an 'ethnic philosophy'.[43] Bodunrin also discards ethnophilosophy. He judges that ethnophilosophical works are 'philosophically unsatisfactory' (Bodunrin 1981:173), not because the materials on which they are based are philosophically underserving; rather, it is because ethnophilosophers 'do not attempt to give a philosophical justification of the belief system or issues that arise in it'. They are simply 'dogmatic in the veneration of the culture' (ibid.172).

Hountondji describes ethnophilosophy as an ethnological work with philosophical pretensions.[44]Among his many definitions of ethnophilosophy, Hountondji writes that it is

> […] the extension into the field of thought in general of the inventory of the corpus of so-called 'primitive' knowledges, [an inventory] that had been undertaken at that time for plants and animals by two pilot-disciplines: ethno botany and ethno zoology.[45]

Even if this is how Hountondji and Towa constructed the term ethnophilosophy, it is not how the term is commonly understood by the large number of sociologists, philosophers, and anthropologists that, almost 70 years after Tempels, still take him seriously.[46] The term is seen in analogy to ethnohistory, ethnoscience, ethnobotany, and so on. These three terms are an anthropological coinage from between the 1950s and the 1970s.

Neugebauer (1990) identifies two central points that may clarify the context of the discussion on ethnophilosophy: The first point relates to the racialist and paternalistic ideology of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and imperialism. The second point, according to Neugebauer, indicates the necessity to be always explicit about one's own concept of

[43] Eboussi-Boulaga (1977: 29-31).

[44] Hountondji (1983: 34).

[45] Hountondji (2002: 208).

[46] For more on this large following see, for example, Kagame (1956); Jahn (1961); Griaule (1965); Griaule & Dieterlen (1965); Mbiti (1970); van Binsbergen (1981, 2003); Hebga (1982); and Neugebauer (1990).

philosophy. Nevertheless, the academic philosophical discourse is not the only discourse in a society. It is possible, in the African context, to clearly perceive a discourse of non-academic philosophers, or a scholastic–religious discourse, or a discourse of sages and elders (ibid. 46-47). This suggests a need to study alternative discourses, with a refocusing on those discourses that have been taken for granted and those that have been suppressed.

2.2. Pike's codification in the study of culture

Members of a society always have more or less coherent ideas as to what the principles are on which that society is built and what makes it tick. However, these so-called participants are not professional sociologists, anthropologists, historians, or political economists. Much of the internal workings of society depend on forms of submission and exploitation which the members can hardly afford to realize consciously and which are covered under thick layers of symbolism and ideology. Sheer exploitation of one class by another may present itself to the participants as laudable service to the gods, the ancestors, the king, the aristocracy, elders, men, etc. So, by and large, the way participants view and categorize their society goes some way towards understanding that society, but never all the way. The classification which a scientific observer applies to a society must take into account the participants' own classifications, but observers also need to go beyond such local classifications, leading to analytical perspectives that the participants themselves would never contemplate, perspectives that would often even be unthinkable in the terms of their own society and culture.

In order to deal with these types of problems, American linguistic anthropologist Kenneth Pike (1912–2000) coined the terms *emic* and *etic*, which to him are not so much two modes of approaching and analysing a society but, in a narrower sense, two ways to render the classification system of a different culture: *emic,* in which the analyst seeks to understand and render the indigenous classification system; and *etic,* in which external analytical categories are imposed regardless of the people's own classification.[47] The paired concepts of *emic* and *etic* have been used to differentiate between the awareness by members of a cultural orientation on how the culture is internally structured, on the one hand, and a structuring that is analytically imposed from the outside, on the other. In other words, the concept *emic* signifies a method of analysis of a cultural orientation as produced by members of that

[47] See Pike's *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior* (1954/1967).

cultural orientation. This model explains the ideology or behaviour of members of that cultural bearing. The concept *etic* signifies a method of analysis produced by a researcher or an outsider or an observer towards a local production of cultural elements. The *etic* model attempts to be universal, while the *emic* is considered to be culture-specific.

Pike's terminology is borrowed from a linguistic method of analysis of cultural orientations in anthropology. In linguistics, one can describe speech sounds from two interrelated angles: that of phonetics (hence *etic*), and that of phonology, whose basic unit of study is the phoneme (adjective, phonemic; hence *emic*).The phonetic perspective provides a purely external description, informed by the anatomical and physical parameters of which speech sounds consist. The phonemic frame of reference, on the other hand, points to the smallest unit of speech sound that can be adequately perceived by those who are able to use the given language, relying on the distinguishing parts of the speech sound.

Pike's classification came from the new orientation of the classic anthropology that had arisen in the 1930s with such proponents as Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Leiris, Fortes, and Griaule. Before this new orientation, the *etic* approach was the dominant mode in anthropology.[48] However, with the coming of prolonged, in-depth fieldwork and therefore of an *emic* approach, the empirical horizon of individual studies had to become narrower. *Emic* analysis necessitated that the researcher learned a new language and stayed on the spot for years, within a narrow space and time. In this sense we can talk of an ethnoscience. Ethnoscience is an *emic* presentation of the indigenous knowledge of a different culture, where diminished mental powers, for example, may be caused by witchcraft, demons, breaking of taboos, ancestors, etc. Yet the same culture also knows about bone setting, obstetrics, and so on in ways that would also be considered valid from a Western or cosmopolitan scientific point of view. We may also cite ethnobotany, which is likely to classify plants according to local cosmologies and beliefs, and not according to the universalizing, analytical, scientific classification system initiated by the Swedish botanist, physician, and zoologist Linnaeus. In the same way, ethnophilosophy must be understood as an attempt to render in discursive, cosmopolitan academic text, the indigenous philosophizing of a particular culture—in this case an African culture. It is not a form of ethnology but simply an application in the philosophical perspective of *emic* anthropology. Such rendering is devoid of the universalist and cosmopolitan viewpoint in both form and meaning. This

[48] We may cite theories concerning the fixed and universal phases of aesthetic development, such as evolutionism, diffusionism, and materialism.

probably explains why in the field of African philosophy, ethnophilosophy (in the hands of Towa, Hountondji, etc.) came to be a pejorative term for the kind of rendering of African traditional thought (as was the case with Tempels, Kagame, etc.) that is no longer being done. But why not? Did we not throw away the child with the bath water?

One of the persistent questions in African philosophical debates is this: what is the nature and possibility of an African philosophy? Can we retrieve it? We shall see how Tempels and Kagame have attempted to answer this question. I will proceed in the next section to show that there is still much authentic African thought in Tempels and Kagame. Their methods may be flawed, and therefore the format of what they present is disputable; Tempels, for instance, used the Scholastic format.[49] However, every format change from oral to text is inherently problematic, and the same format change is always involved whenever we do cultural description.

2.3. Placide Frans Tempels

Tempels is credited with being the first to argue that Africans have a philosophy. Even though he was neither an African by birth nor a professional philosopher, he had a huge influence on African philosophy with the publication of his book *Bantu Philosophy.* It is widely acknowledged that current discussions about African philosophy are in some way a reaction to Tempels' book, originally published in Dutch as *Bantoe-filosophie* in 1945.[50] Tempels is both hero and villain in the story of African philosophy. Perhaps both terms are too strong, yet Tempels is credited with being the first to argue that Africans have a philosophy. In the words of Eritrean philosopher Tsenay Serequeberhan:

> Tempels was forced to admit—against the grain of the then established 'knowledge'—that the Bantu/African is not a mere beast devoid of consciousness, but a human being whose conscious awareness of existence is grounded on certain foundational notions. (Serequeberhan 1991a:11)

[49] The Scholastic format pertains to the theological and philosophical method of learning in medieval European schools, which emphasized deductive logic and the authority of key figures such as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas.

[50] The first French version, entitled *La Philosophie bantoue,* was published in 1945, and the first English translation, by Rev. Colin King, was published in 1959.

Serequeberhan's comment is deliberately negative and interculturally misleading. Tempels wrote his book not because he was 'forced' as Serequeberhan opines, but because he had lived with the Baluba. Throughout his encounters with the Baluba, he was convinced of and open to Africa's capability to build a philosophical life-world. That did not force him to admit but rather *forced him to proclaim* the fact, in the face of widespread racialist assumptions to the contrary at his time. In addition, the numerous criticisms levied against Tempels in major debates in African philosophical circles by professional philosophers require some comment here. Tempels was neither a professional philosopher nor an ethnologist or anthropologist. He was clearly only an amateur philosopher who had undergone two years of training in philosophy in the seminary while preparing for the Roman Catholic priesthood. That was his only claim to scholarship and academic knowledge.

Mudimbe, a leading African philosopher and linguist, notes that Tempels' book 'cast doubts on the greatness of the colonial venture' and provoked the anger of those who 'considered the right to colonize as a natural right' (Mudimbe 1988:137). In addition, Hountondji observes that Tempels was a voice for humanitarianism and social justice within the framework of colonialism.

However, Tempels is also a villain of the story. For while he acknowledged that the Bantu-speaking had a philosophy, he maintained that they were for the most part unconscious of that philosophy:

> We do not claim that Bantus are capable of presenting us with a philosophical treatise complete with an adequate vocabulary. It is our own intellectual training that enables us to effect its systematic development. It is up to us to provide them with an accurate account of their conception of entities, in such a way that they will recognize themselves in our words and will agree. (Tempels 1959:24)

Furthermore, as Mudimbe argues, Tempels did not totally reject the ideology of colonialism, but rather:

> […] proposes more efficient means to his avowed goal, the task of civilising and evangelising Bantu peoples. (Mudimbe 1988:137-138)

Moreover, as Hountondji remarked, while crediting the Bantu with a philosophy Tempels' own philosophical credentials were minimal and he used the word 'philosophy'

loosely to mean little more than a coherent, rich, and complex way of thinking.[51]Finally, Mudimbe argues that even though we have gone beyond the far-reaching and drastic change initiated by Tempels, we still find traces of Tempels in African philosophy. The most stimulating debates or orientations in the field of African philosophy still delineate themselves, directly or indirectly, with respect to Tempels (ibid.).[52] The Cameroonian philosopher Pierre Meinrad Hebga (1928–2008) corroborates this view when he challenges those scholars who oppose Tempels and underrate the work of his supporters (by referring to this work debasingly as 'ethnophilosophy') as just being unappreciative of someone who made it possible for them to philosophize (Hebga 1982).

Before we delve into Tempels' conception of a Bantu philosophy, it is necessary to take a look at the intellectual climate and the impact this climate had at the time. The 20th century was dominated by a number of highly significant geopolitical processes: colonialism and decolonization; the Cold War and its subsequent culmination in the supposed global hegemony of the United States of America; greatly intensified intercontinental migration (especially from Africa), and the concomitant rise of multiculturalism especially in Western Europe; a new and decisive phase of globalization supported by new technologies of information and communication; and the emergence of fundamentalisms and terrorisms on a hitherto unprecedented, global scale. Under the influence of these geopolitical processes, a dominant discourse of difference emerged. There was a remarkable difference claimed to exist between Western and 'primitive' philosophies. This difference belongs to an intellectual edifice as expressed by Lucien Lévy-Brühl. Racialism emerged in the 18th century as the dominant expression of European expansion and the transcontinental domination which the racialism justified. Colonial rule after the Berlin Congress was saturated with racialism. Lévy-Brühl, an armchair anthropologist (rather than a philosopher), merely gave a systematic expression to what was commonly thought all around him by intellectuals from Europe and the United States of America. He posits that there is a radical difference between the West

[51] In this work, the term 'Bantu' is used as a linguistic category/macrofamily (a division of Niger–Congo or Benue) and hence as an admissible and established scientific term. This is opposed to 'Bantu' as an ethnic category in the southern African racialist political system. The early African philosophers took over the ethnic Bantu category, although Tempels and especially Kagame, the linguist, may have actually meant 'Bantu-speaking'. Because of the unsavoury political antecedents of the term, in southern African scholarly literature the term 'Bantu' is no longer used and is replaced by the uncontentious, conspicuously linguistic 'Bantu-speaking'.

[52] See for example, Towa (1971b); Oruka (1975); Bodunrin (1981); and Hountondji (1983).

and 'primitive' peoples. The West, for example, is characterized by a history of intellectual and spiritual reasoning, whereas the life, *Weltanschauung,* and thinking of the 'primitives' were viewed as inferior or having nothing in common with the West.[53]

From Lévy-Brühl's assertion, we can deduce a theory of two types of mentality: the Western participates in rational, logical thought and inquires into causal determinations and relations; 'primitives' are pre-logical and strictly depend upon the law of mystical participation.[54] This binary opposition model conceived by Lévy-Brühl ushered in contributions dealing with 'primitive philosophies'. This does not necessarily mean that all those who were then studying 'primitive' organizations tried to defend Lévy-Brühl's thesis of a fundamental difference in reason between the 'primitive' and the 'civilized'. Instead, all of them, even those like Delafosse, who commented upon African structures and peoples with a vivid *Einfühlung* (sympathy), tried to pinpoint the divergence between Europe and the Black continent and to describe this difference in a bid to possibly bring out points of convergence in human cultures. By 1965, English anthropologist Sir E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1902–1973), who propagated Lévy-Brühl in the 1930s and translated or prefaced some of his works in English, could state:

> [...] there is no reputable anthropologist who today accepts this theory of the two distinct types of mentality. (Evans-Pritchard 1980: 88)[55]

In *The Invention of Africa* (1988) and *The Idea of Africa* (1994), Mudimbe maps out the historical course of the apprehension and description of the 'Other' in Western thought from pre-colonial times and the consolidation of the African image in the power/knowledge system (Foucault) of colonialism and during the post-colonial period. The divisions between savage versus civilized, pre-logical versus logical, perceptual versus conceptual, oral versus

[53] See Mudimbe (1988: 135-136) and also Evans-Pritchard (1980: 80).

[54] In an attempt to make a difference between the 'Western' mind and the 'primitive' or 'native' mind,Lévy-Brühl argues that the primitive mind is unable to address contradictions, unlike the Western mind that uses logic and speculation. Consequently, the native mind does not distinguish the supernatural world from reality but rather uses 'mystical participation' to manipulate the world. This means that the native mind engages in larger spiritual realities, beyond normal human understanding or experience. In this way, human beings in primitive cultures cannot be separated from their collective representations (group rituals, religions, myths, and customs), which are transmitted from one generation to another.

[55] For more criticisms of anthropology, see van Hensbroek (2003).

written, and religious versus scientific all indicate a division of reason between the so-called closed (African) and open (Western) societies. These dichotomies illustrate Eurocentric prejudices in Western thought about so-called primitive peoples and endorse the political project behind the constructions of cultural paradigms of the 'Other'.

Meanwhile, philosophy developed, in the course of the 20th century, a sophisticated philosophy of difference, primarily associated with Jacques Derrida. By contrast to its structuralist predecessors—especially Lévi-Strauss, who stressed (fundamental) difference as a primal strategy of human thought—these post-structuralists have explored the very rich and revealing implications of the idea inherent in Hegelian and Marxian dialectics that any presence carries within itself the implications of its own absence. Any difference has the implications of a non-difference, which is a state of being identical. In this philosophical tradition, the human condition is understood to be self-evidently and automatically beyond fundamental difference, unless the one-sidedness of political strategy and performative self-presentation tempt one to violence against reality, including a fellow humanity, and to insist on a difference that is not really there.

The dynamics of socially asserted identity (e.g. in the ethnic, political, and religious field) are claimed to thrive on the interplay between the (occasional, situational) invention of difference and the (occasional, situational) admission of such invention. From an intercultural philosophical perspective, the point is not to deny the existence and the socially constitutive nature of difference but to critique the tendency to claim fundamental difference, and to overcome the stalemate stagnation of social, political, and intellectual engagement that this tendency entails. This requires that we de-essentialize our own science in an attempt to go beyond fundamental difference and find a common ground.[56]

Tempels was caught at the crossroads of several currents, namely, the evolutionary assumption of the late 19th century, Lévy-Brühl's theses on pre-logism, the European self-declared mission to civilize Africans through colonization, and Christian evangelization (Mudimbe 1988:136). Tempels came to Africa for religious motives, and he identified with the Bantu in a bid to bring them along the road to civilization, knowledge, and true religion. Even though he came to preach a foreign worldview, he ended up learning, respecting, and codifying the indigenous worldview. We can therefore perceive of *Bantu Philosophy* as a personal testimony to a new discovery that made a great impact in the life of Tempels. He admits:

[56] We will repeatedly return to this point throughout this work.

> I must say that my goal, in this study of the Bantu was to feel myself 'Bantu' at least once. I wanted to think, feel, live like him, have a Bantu soul. All that with the intention of adapting […]. There was doubtless in my attitude something more, or something else, than the simple scientific interest of an anthropologist who asks questions without the object of his science, the living man in front of him, necessarily being the objective of his investigations. My attitude perhaps included an element of sympathy towards this living individual and evoked in him a reaction of confidence towards me. (Tempels 1962:37)

From this quotation, we notice that Tempels distances himself from the dominant anthropological model at the time. Anthropology, as a discipline, originated in the age of European expansion in order to entrench colonial rule and foster European prejudices about so-called primitive peoples.[57] Tempels went against the grain and adopted a radically different attitude from the ethnocentric emphasis of the classical anthropology of his time; his attitude was one of sympathy with real encounters, visibly absent in anthropology. As an *etic* outsider trying to bring out the *emic* philosophy of the Bantu-speaking, he remained open to them. His encounter with the Baluba was independent of the assumptions and presuppositions of what he had learned. He lived among the Baluba in a non-impositional way, in a bid to catch a glimpse of their life as it showed itself. This encounter also transformed his own life radically. He involved himself in what Husserl calls 'phenomenological reduction': examining the meaning produced by pure impersonal consciousness and describing the human 'life-world' in terms of those essences found within conscious experience.

There were immediate reactions to Tempels' book. French philosopher Gaston Bachelard greeted Tempels' book as a treasure. Senegalese intellectual Alioune Diop pledged his faith on it and wrote an introduction to the French version in which he described *Bantu Philosophy* as the most influential work he had ever read. Nevertheless, the book met with stiff resistance from the Roman Catholic hierarchy.[58] This, however, did not dissuade

[57] For more on anthropology see, for example, Mudimbe (1988); van Hensbroek (2003); and Chapter 7.

[58] For example, Bishop Jean-Felix de Hemptinne tried to control the circulation of *Bantu Philosophy* and persuade Rome to condemn the book as heretical. He even insisted that Tempels be expelled from the country. All these attempts, however, failed and his critique has no relevance for the contemporary discussion. The African debate, with further critiques of Tempels, is discussed in the next chapter.

Tempels from proposing his work, and particularly his ontology, as a good way white men could use to encounter Africans and understand them.

We have seen above the intellectual climate and the impact it had at the time Tempels wrote his seminal work *Bantu Philosophy*. How, then, does Tempels conceive of a Bantu philosophy? How does he make explicit Bantu traditional systems of thought within the framework of their rationality? In the next section, I put forth the main points in Tempels' conception of Bantu philosophy.

2.4. Tempels' vision of a Bantu philosophy

Mudimbe (1988:138-139) summarizes Tempels' conception of a Bantu philosophy in five propositions:[59]

1) *Since Bantu are human beings, they have organized systems of principles and references* (Mudimbe 1988:138).These systems constitute a philosophy even if Bantu are 'not capable of formulating a philosophical treatise, complete with an adequate vocabulary' (Tempels 1959:36). Thus, it is the function of outsiders, like Tempels himself, to formulate for the Bantu what their philosophy is. In other words, this philosophy is an *implicit* one, and it is Tempels who can make it *explicit* by interpreting Bantu answers to his questions, thereby unveiling its organized and systematic character of beliefs and customs. Even though Tempels introduces a particular mode of representing and endorsing the existence of a Bantu philosophy, I find his position here extremely condescending. Besides, this raises two pertinent questions: why should the Baluba be incapable of expressing their thought in discursive, coherent, explicit terms? Why should it require outsiders, such as Tempels, to do that for them? Let me explain. The Baluba cannot do so because so far they have not been exposed to examples of such systematic exposition of thought. Even Tempels knows only one such example: the Scholastic, Thomist philosophy he learned in his training for the priesthood. Hence, his rendering of Baluba thought has a Thomist format. Kagame, as we shall see later in this chapter, also adds to this format the modern philosophical format because he had been reading Western philosophy. In my mind, it is only the established textual examples, the recognition of such discursive rendering as a genre, which constitutes the difference between Tempels and his Baluba interlocutors. There is no inherent

[59] For more inspiring summaries see, for example, Eboussi-Boulaga (1968) and Tshiamalenga (1981).

incapability here, just as there is no inherent incapability on Tempels' side. In fact, Tempels is clearly only an amateur philosopher, forced by circumstances to write the philosophy of his Baluba friends in order to bring his ulterior civilizing motives closer to realization.

2) *This philosophy is ontology*.[60] In the history of Western philosophy, starting from the Pre-Socratic philosophers, the nature of reality has been described in terms of a static conception of being, by the use of set phrases such as 'the reality that is', 'anything that exists', or 'what is'. This may be largely so in Western philosophy, but it is not universally so. Tempels does not accept this static conception of being and he attributes to the Bantu a dynamic conception of being, an ontology in which being is conceived as 'vital force'. The universe can be described as an interrelation of forces within the whole of existence. Heraclitus, for example, explained change and movement as the essential feature of reality. To this we may add the conception of ontology in the works of Heidegger and the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre (1905–1980) in the 20th century. Heidegger, for the grounding of his ontology, likes to go back to Parmenides, a Pre-Socratic philosopher of being, more even than to Plato. For Heidegger, being is continuously manifesting itself in concrete manifestations in the world. It is the meaning that reigns in everything that is. Our being-in-the-world is the basic state of human existence. It is our human existence that reveals itself, and it is quite a different conception of 'human being' from the one we find in traditional philosophy. For Sartre, existence precedes essence. We cannot explain human nature in the same way as we can describe a manufactured article. There is no such thing as a common human nature that is common to all humans, no such thing as a specific essence. Rocks and dogs are different from human beings. Rocks and dogs, Sartre would say, have only what he calls 'being-in-itself' (*être-en-soi*), or mere existence. But a human being, according to Sartre, not only exists, that is, has being-in-itself, but also has 'being-for-itself' (*être-pour-soi*)—which means that a human being, unlike an inanimate object or tree, is a conscious subject that creates its own future. It is with such an approach that Tempels attempts to underpin the African theory of being (ontology), the vital force, which is inherently dynamic. Here is what he says about the vitality of being and how being relates to its force as opposed to the Western notion of being:

[60] Ontology is the branch of philosophy that concerns itself with the question of being, the ultimate reality or existence. A systematic account of existence is the major preoccupation of philosophers such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze, Levinas, and Foucault.

> We can conceive the transcendental notion of 'being' by separating it from its attribute, 'force', but the Bantu cannot. 'Force' in his thought is a necessary element in 'being', and the concept 'force' is inseparable from the definition of 'being'. There is no idea among Bantu of 'being' divorced from the idea of 'force'. (Tempels 1959: 50-51)

3) *The main idea in Bantu ontology is a concept of force rather than essence, as compared with Western ontology.* Bantu ontology in its specificity implies that being, as understood in the Western tradition, signifies force in Bantu tradition, and therefore one can state that being is force (being = force).

Here is Tempels:

> Bantu speak, act, live as if, for them, beings were forces. Force is not for them an adventitious, accidental reality, force is even more than a necessary attribute of beings: Force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force. (Tempels 1959: 51)

> The origin, the subsistence or annihilation of beings or of forces, is expressly and exclusively attributed to God. The term to 'create' in its proper connotation of 'to evoke from not being' is found in its full signification in Bantu terminology (*Kupanga* in Kiluba). (ibid. 57)

> All force can be strengthened or enfeebled. That is to say, all being can become stronger or weaker. (ibid. 55)

It is this ontology that explains Bantu consciousness and action. It is found in their social institutions, in the moral and religious lives of the people. The interrelationship of forces is seen in a hierarchy of beings running down from God (the origin of the vital force), through man (including the dead ancestors and the living community of humans), to the animal and inanimate world. The dynamic relationship of the vital force in every being can be permanently sustained, decreased, or simply brought to an end. The force grows or diminishes during passage from one stage to another. With these interactions of forces, beings are neither tied to themselves nor are they passive, but they are involved in what Tempels describes as a 'principle of activity' (ibid. 51); and this 'dynamic dialectic of

energy' (Mudimbe 1988:139) forms the basis of what Tempels depicts as the 'general laws of vital causality' (1959: 67–68), that is to say:

> (a)Man (living or deceased) can directly reinforce or diminish the being of another man;
> (b)The vital human force can directly influence inferior force-beings (animal, vegetable, or mineral) in their being;
> (c)A rational being (spirit, manes, or the living) can act indirectly upon another rational being by communicating his vital force to an inferior force (animal, vegetable, or mineral) through the intermediacy of which it influences the rational being. (ibid. 67-68)

4) Bantu notion of being can be construed and rendered with clarity through the conceptual frame of Western philosophy. By this, Tempels implies that the Bantu have an implicit, unconscious philosophy that needs a superior Western terminology for it to be uncovered. It would be instructive to note that Tempels is not only advocating for a Bantu mode of thought. He is also attempting to reconcile both Europe and Africa at the level of spirituality and, subsequently, of mind. He argues:

> It is our job to proceed to such systematic development. It is we who will be able to tell them in precise terms, what their inmost concept of being is. (ibid. 36)

5) Bantu ontology could well be a possible basis for and reference point to the ontologies of all 'primitive peoples' or non-Western societies in general. In fact, we notice that through the whole of Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy,* he employs the words 'Africans', 'Bantu', 'primitives', 'natives', and 'savages' interchangeably. By this he probably wants to indicate that even though he is introducing to us the 'philosophy' of his Baluba friends (a small community in the Belgian Congo, today known as the Democratic Republic of Congo), his conclusions could well be a possible basis for and reference point to the ontologies of all 'primitive peoples' or non-Western societies in general. This position refutes the theories of Lévy-Brühl and ethnocentrism inherent in classical anthropology. The point conveyed here by Tempels is that indigenous systems of knowledge, outside the North Atlantic one, especially among so-called primitive peoples, have to be recognized as valid knowledge. Tempels notes:

> Many colonials who are living in contact with Africans have assured me that I have set out nothing new, but merely set out systematically what they had grasped vaguely from their practical knowledge of Africans. (1959: 37)

We have seen the five main propositions in the philosophy of Tempels. It is important to note the ideological relevance of his work. Tempels adds to the European discourse on the non-Western world, and in this case upon Africa, and he also conceives it as part of his 'mission to civilize'. Yet, in this attempt, he implicitly argues for the recognition of an African philosophy. Thus, in spite of the book's extremely condescending tone, Tempels makes a significant break from classical anthropology. Moreover, at the level of academic African philosophy, the book served as a basis and reference point for all future attempts at formulating and constructing an indigenous African philosophical system. This ignited the debate about philosophy in Africa among academic African philosophers who reproached the work of Tempels. We shall examine these critiques in Chapter 3.

But far from these critiques, a better way to read Tempels' book would be to understand the context in which he wrote it and how his encounter with the Bantu shaped his own life. While Tempels was attempting to 'civilize', he found his moment of truth in an encounter with people he came to teach. He thus became their student and he tried to understand their version of the truth. During this encounter he came to know many things about the Bantu, which radically called into question his own convictions as the civilizer. He explored these conscious experiences without making any metaphysical assumptions. This intercultural encounter had a profound transformational effect in the life of Tempels. Tempels' active participation in the symbols and rituals of those he was supposed to teach led him to understand and interiorize their indigenous beliefs better, rather than just limiting himself with prejudices. He knew where he was coming from but found ways of negotiating his own identity with the Bantu and making meaning out of the tension of the various contradictions in his own life.

In the first proposition of Tempels' philosophy sketched above, he claims that Africans are incapable of articulating the way they perceive and understand the world. This opinion stems from the derogatory, Eurocentric conception that Africans live in a world that is essentially symbolized and ritualized in character. This implies that indigenous African peoples predominantly articulate their beliefs and values through rites, rituals, and masquerades, rather than using discursive verbal statements such as proverbs and myths. I think such an argument calls for the intercultural fieldworker, who is professionally trained,

to be active in trying to decode (interpolate the meanings of) such behaviour (symbolic and ritual), proverbs, and myths. Moreover, the tendency to limit the verbal articulateness of Africa peoples has been strongly challenged.[61] In the next two sections, we will see some attempts to decode symbolism, ritual, myths, and proverbs in a comprehensive and discursive manner. This is seen in the works of Marcel Griaule and Alexis Kagame.

2.5. Griaule's Ogotemmêli

Marcel Griaule (1898–1956), the French anthropologist known for his studies of the Dogon of West Africa, suggests a certain affinity between so-called Bantu ontology, as pioneered in Father Tempels' amateur ethnography, and the worldview of the Dogon in present-day Mali. In the preface to *Conversations with Ogotemmêli*, he shows this relationship:

> Ten years ago [G. Dieterlen's *Les Ames des Dogon* (1941), S. de Ganay's *Les Devises* (1941) and my own *Les Masques* (1938)] had already drawn attention to new facts concerning the 'vital force'. […] They have shown the primary importance of the notion of the person and his relations with society, with the universe, and with the divine. Thus Dogon ontology has opened new vistas for ethnologists. […] More recently […] Rev. Fr. Tempels presented an analysis of conceptions of this kind, and raised the question of whether "Bantu thought should not be regarded as a system of philosophy". (Griaule 1965: 1- 2)

In his study, Griaule relied on one informant, Ogotemmêli of Lower Ogol, a hunter who became blind by accident and who, in Griaule's words, was 'endowed with exceptional intelligence and wisdom'. In 33 days Ogotemmêli was able to introduce Griaule to the popular wisdom traditions and beliefs of the Dogon. Oruka, however, thinks Ogotemmêli is a folk sage, as opposed to the philosophic sage, in his categorization of sagacity.[62] Griaule's essay is organized around the informant's interwoven monologues.[63] These monologues, which are divided into two parts, range from the subject of the creation of the world to the

[61] Some examples include the works of Griaule, Gyekye, Kagame, and Wiredu.

[62] We will repeatedly return to this categorization in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

[63] There is an update on Dogon studies at the end of this section. For more critical literature around Griaule and Ogotemmêli see, for example, Ogono d'Arou (1956); Sarevskaja (1963); Goody (1967); Lettens (1971); Clifford (1983); and van Beek (1991).

origin of social organizations. The first part is based on a mythical decoding of the universe in its being, and the second focuses on interpreting the various symbols that underlie Dogon history, culture, and society. According to Griaule, the second part describes:

> [...] a world system, the knowledge of which will revolutionize all accepted ideas about the mentality of Africans and of primitive peoples in general. (Griaule 1965: 2)

Nevertheless, many anthropologists, especially on Dogon studies, have not endorsed Griaule's proposition for two main reasons:

First, they doubted the authenticity of the conversations Griaule held with Ogotemmêli. This is because the Dogon, as primitives who live in a world that is symbolic and ritualized in character, were considered to be unable to have conceived of and articulated such a complex structuring of knowledge. In addition, Ogotemmêli, without any formal training in the conventional Western sense (indeed, he had undergone no modern education and spoke no Western language), was able to articulate this in so compelling a manner that it went against the grain of previous studies in and of African thought. Ogotemmêli's mystical display of intuitive intellectualism puzzled the anthropological establishment. In fact, the dominant view was that the Dogon, like all primitives, lacked skills in decoding intellectually abstract symbols. Nevertheless, I think this is not a valid argument. This is because it merely underrates the extent to which literate specialist esoteric knowledge, like that of Islamic scholars, had entered the world of the Dogon and had been digested there. The Senegalese philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne (2004), for example, has written an intriguing exploratory account of the influence and effects of these philosophical texts, originally from Greece and then passed to the Islamic world. He asserts that these texts were introduced into the African context more than one thousand years ago.

Second, Griaule's book claims to be a simple report of Ogotemmêli's teaching. These recitations of a simple guardian of ancestral tradition, in which Ogotemmêli intelligently and methodically interprets much of Dogon myths, symbols, and rituals, have been doubted. Moreover, Griaule's book has also been criticized for not obeying the basic principles of social anthropology. How did he dialogue with Ogotemmêli in just 33 days? The standard anthropological procedure would entail long-term participant observation and linguistic competence in a bid to undertake key informant interviewing.

Finally, I think it is necessary to provide some updates on Dogon studies, especially on Griaule's *Conversations with Ogotemmêli.* At present, the consensus is that *Conversations*

with Ogotemmêli can no longer be seen as a rendition of either Dogon folk philosophy or that of an individual sage, atypical as he might be. The reasons are twofold. First, the Dutch anthropologist Walter van Beek (1991) contends that the creation myth does not resonate at all with anything discoverable in Dogon society. This implies that the myth might be either a personal creation by Ogotemmêli, or a construct in which Griaule was important. The first option is unlikely, for various reasons, one of them being that a new set of myths later emerged which completely contradicted the first one.[64] The second reason follows from Anne Doquet's focus in her thesis *Les masques dogon: ethnologie savant et ethnologie autochtone* (Karthala 1999) on the manner in which Griaule produced his book. Using Griaule's own field notes, which have been published on microfiche, Doquet shows how the information that Griaule got from Ogotemmêli was fragmentary and contradictory, and how it was worked and re-worked thoroughly by Griaule himself into a coherent and appealing tale. Griaule is very much present in the myth himself, not just in the eliciting answers but also in filling in gaps, muting contradictions, and constructing the whole edifice of the myth. Doquet thus corroborates, and the same holds *a fortiori* for Renard Pale, van Beek's conclusion that *Conversations with Ogotemmêli* is not a '*document dogon'* but a '*document humain'*. Their findings have been sustained by a line of new researchers, such as Eric Jolly, Jules Holder, Polly Richards, Barbara Demott, and Jacky Bouju, and buttressed by Dogon social scientists such as Isaie Dougnon and Sidiki Tinta. Their findings indicate that these 'conversations' were, in fact, fabrications by members of a Griaule research team in search of international fame and fortune (Hallen 2009:24-25). I think van Beek deserves credit for clearly and emphatically debunking Griaule. Nevertheless, his debunking of Griaule on details does not really diminish the overall stature of Ogotemmêli as a Dogon sage in terms of Oruka's definition or my conception of sagacity. I will come back to this point in Chapter 5.

Griaule's work greatly contributed to indicating the importance of myth in an African setting, and the relation of myth to primitive philosophies. In spite of the great promise Griaule and his followers attach to myths, however, Oruka attempts to dislodge myths from the ranks of African philosophy, especially in his conception of philosophic sagacity. For him, the works of Tempels and his followers do not contain philosophy but rather mythologies. Myths, according to Oruka, are removed from philosophical thought and scientific inquiry. He uses a provocative and ironic title, *Mythologies as African Philosophy*, to warn that:

[64] See van Beek (1991).

> African mythologies should not be substituted for African philosophy. Mythologies thrive well where the past is placed above everything, above the present and above the future. One gives mythology a wonderfully high place when one calls it 'philosophy', and then it can be a great obstacle to progress and development. (Oruka: 1997:34)

Here, I think Oruka exhibits a specific conception of myth and mythology. From a modernist standpoint, Oruka sets aside myth, religious sentiment, and mystical experience (Oruka 1990:1ff) and values the present over the past (Oruka 1997:34). Myths tend to be pejoratively thought of as collective representations that are made up of untruths or stories of the past. The French anthropologist Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) argues that there is not just one definition or approach to myth. According to Lévi-Strauss' influential approach to myth, myths are in the first place rational structures of superimposed binary oppositions, guides for thought, but not for the heart, which is absent in Lévi-Strauss' theories. Myths can take paradoxical forms and even irrational contradictory versions and may not necessarily express a given rationality, a fact of which the members of a community might be absolutely unaware.

Furthermore, van Binsbergen's research on comparative mythology (2003, 2008, 2009, 2012b), building especially on Witzel (2001, 2012), traces the global history of mythology, which may span as much as 200,000 years. In an attempt to show cultural unity as the original condition of humanity, he cites mythology as an aspect of African traditional wisdom. Myths articulate the wisdom traditions of a people, and they help to portray and underpin the people's conception of the world and man. Myths also provide causal explanations for specific natural phenomena, human institutions, and even names. In this way, they provide models to be emulated and even act as sources of inspiration in real life. Hence, Oruka needs to broaden his conception of myths, as collective representations that are based on events or experiences.

2.6 Alexis Kagame and the ethnophilosophical school

Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* provoked a distant intellectual reaction from the Rwandan priest, Alexis Kagame. Kagame unreservedly wanted to check the validity of Tempels' theory (Kagame 1956: 8) and to correct its generalizations and inherent intellectual shortcomings. Unlike Tempels, Kagame was a professional philosopher, a knowledgeable historian,

anthropologist, linguist, and theologian. In 1955, Kagame was awarded his doctorate in philosophy from the Gregorian University in Rome. Two of his books made a profound impact in the field of African philosophy. His first treatise, *La Philosophie Bantu- Rwandaise de l'être*, deals with the Banya-Rwanda, a community well-defined by its history, language, and culture. The second work, *La Philosophie Bantu comparée,* expands this research to the whole of the Bantu area. According to Kagame, Tempels should be praised for using the philosophical method, the Scholastic, Thomist method he learned in his training for the priesthood. Yet, *Bantu Philosophy* shows that Tempels was not a sophisticated, state-of-the-art scholar. The first reason Kagame gives is that Tempels did not pay attention to Bantu languages, which he claims could help express the worldview of Africans. Second, Tempels' synthesis, which is based strictly on his experience within the Baluba-Shaba community, does not offer a thorough understanding of Bantu cultures (Kagame 1971:592). It is important to point out that thousands of kilometres separate Rwanda from the Baluba in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Kagame reconstructs a philosophical system through linguistic analyses of Bantu language.[65] This approach is not just part of his academic training; he was also following the global intellectual trend (language-based structuralism) as initiated by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Kagame attempts to demonstrate that Bantu languages reveal a complex ontology that is uniquely African. This point comes close to the Whorf-Sapir thesis (first half of the 20thcentury) on the near-total determination of the human life-world by the specific categories inherent in the specific language spoken. Kagame also subscribes to the analytical approach to philosophy. I will briefly present these global intellectual trends below.

2.7. Structuralism and language

Structuralism is a methodology that seeks to find the underlying rules and conventions governing large social systems such as language or cultural mythology. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) was bothered by standard 19th century linguistic theories

[65] Bantu languages are a subgroup of a larger group, Benue-Congo, which also comprises the Bantoid non-Bantu languages (Nigeria, Cameroon) and grassfields Bantu (Cameroon and particularly Nigeria). Languages of the Bantu family are spoken in Cameroon, Central African Republic, Kenya, and Uganda, and completely or predominantly in Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Congo, Cabinda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Comores, Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Lesotho, Botswana, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Namibia.

that presumed to find some commonality between foreign languages. He emphasized the study of the language system itself (*langue*, which is an idealized abstraction of language), rather than particular speech (*parole*, which is language used in daily life). De Saussure argued for a distinction between *langue* and *parole*. He was concerned with the 'deep structures' of language common to all speakers. He saw linguistics as the study of signs, which he defined as a combination of the *signifier* (the physical thing that signifies) and the *signified* (that which is signified). Hence, for de Saussure, language is made of signs, and the sign is made up of the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the sound pattern; the signified is the concept that comes to mind upon hearing it. De Saussure claimed that these are both psychological processes. He believed that recognizing a sign is more complex than connecting a name with a thing. It was French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss who adapted and applied de Saussure's methods to his ethnographic research. Lévi-Strauss sought to discover the underlying structures of thought in the myths of non-industrial societies and human communities generally. He noted that cultures are seen as systems of signs, the meaning of which could be found in the particular relationships of signs in the system itself. This implies that the meaning of a thing or an individual person is defined by its surrounding cultural structures. It also implies that the system has a coherent structure, which according to Lévi-Strauss is reflected in paired opposites.

2.8. Analytical philosophy

For Kagame, to speak of a Bantu philosophy, two conditions for its possibility ought to be taken into consideration: first, studying the consistency in Bantu languages; and second, using a philosophical method from Western philosophy in order to analyse it (Kagame 1971: 591). This method is the analytical approach to philosophy. During a large part of the 20th century, the dominant philosophical movement in the English-speaking world was known as analytical philosophy. Analytical philosophy is grounded on the thesis that philosophical questions are primarily questions of language, with special focus on clarifying notions through an analysis of language. The main tasks of the philosopher, therefore, become clarification ('analysis' in the narrowest sense) of the meanings of the words/language with which our beliefs are expressed and justified—in the sense of identifying and assessing the arguments and evidence with which those beliefs are justified. Such rigorous linguistic analyses could prevent the abuse of language. This is the task analytical philosophers such as

Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Alfred North Whitehead prescribe to the philosopher.

African philosophers such as Kagame and Wiredu take this challenge seriously and apply it in their study of African philosophy. We may also add the Ordinary Language Analysis adapted by Hallen and Sodipo in their study of the language of the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria. It may be instructive to note that Kagame, for instance, uses language more as a naïve linguistic scholar, rather than as analytical philosophers such as Russell, Whitehead, or Wittgenstein, and based on Scholasticism and thus Aristotle. Wiredu (1972c) invites us to take a thorough philosophical look at the different kinds of beliefs Africans do actually have as well as the languages with which they are expressed. In Wiredu's opinion, philosophy can be intercultural if it can be translated to meet with the shared foundational semantic and logical canons between the different natural languages (Wiredu 1998:148). This gives the possibility for an intercultural dialogue in philosophy and enhances the intercultural character of philosophy. He goes further to explore the philosophy inherent in the language and culture of his native Akan language (Wiredu 1980; 1996). Wiredu argues that the different 'cultures' necessarily have a universal component that accounts for the communication between them. Without such a component there would be no communication.

What, therefore, is Kagame's method? Kagame prescribes a systematic analysis and interpretation of a specific language in a bid to get to philosophical elements which can then be compared with other languages in the Bantu area. Here is Kagame's description:

> [My method is to] look for the elements of a Bantu philosophy first within a specific language; to affirm nothing that is not based in an indisputable cultural proof, transcribed in the original language itself and translated literally into the language accessible to the foreign reader. Once in possession of these basic elements, to undertake the study on the scale of the Bantu area, to verify how each zone agrees with or differs with the results initially determined. (Kagame 1971:592)

Kagame's approach could be upheld as a preliminary step towards philosophizing. He worked on the premise that Aristotle's ontology was a consequence of Greek grammar. He then tried to bring to light what he believed to be the ontology underlying the different Bantu languages. Through language, we can find this collective, deep, implicit philosophy. This silent philosophy can be described when we apply the major Scholastic grids to the language. They are formal logic, ontology, theodicy, cosmology, and ethics.

Kagame aligns the four Bantu ontological categories with Aristotle's (Table 2.1):

Table 2.1: Comparing Kagame's Bantu ontological categories with those of Aristotle

Bantu Categories	**Aristotle's traditional categories**	**Greek equivalents**
1.*Muntu*: Being with intelligence 2.*Kintu*: Being without intelligence, or thing	1. Substance	1. οὐσία
3.*Hantu*: Expresses the time and place (presents variants such as *Pa*- in the eastern Bantu languages, *Va*-in the west, and *Go*-+ *Lo/ro* in the south).	2. Time 3. Place	2. πότε 3. ποῦ
4. *Kuntu*: Indicates modality and thus centralizes all the notions related to modifications of the being in itself or vis-à-vis other beings. Hence, *Kuntu* corresponds to seven different Aristotelian categories	4. Quality 5. Quantity 6. Relation 7. Action 8. Passion 9. Position 10. Possession	4. ποιόν 5.ποσόν 6. πρός τι 7. ποιεῖν 8. πάσχειν 9. κεῖσθαι 10. ἔχειν

For the sake of comparison, I have added the Aristotelian categories in Greek, which do not appear in Kagame's text. From the table, one notices that the first two Bantu categories split the Aristotelian concept of substance. Man and things are not of the same category but constitute two radically different divisions. Man is the order which conceives the way in which things are thinkable. This is because man is endowed with intelligence. The things that are thinkable are non-man, *Kintu,* beings without intelligence. Humans are also thinkable but they are not usually conceived of as things, even though slaves could be. This category of thinkable things includes minerals, vegetables, and animals. Bantu ontology is clearly seen through the interrelationship between these four categories, which all come from the same root, *ntu*, and which refer to being or essence and also the idea of force. Kagame asserts that the Bantu equivalent of *to be* is strictly and only a copula. It links the subject class with the predicate and determines the quality of the proposition. By enunciating *muntu, kintu* (the essence of something) is signified and the notion of existence is not necessarily present (Kagame 1971: 602).

2.9. Kagame and the challenges of interculturality

In this section, I intend to go beyond the shortcomings inherent in Kagame's project in a bid to provide a viable direction to African philosophical discourse. In the context of globalization, we notice that values and other cultural contents flow just as people and commodities do, and many boundaries are dissolving. I think Kagame's conception of African philosophy needs a re-thinking. Can an African, in the current globalizing context, construct his being based on language? Can we structure African historical wisdom on purely linguistic lines? Are meanings within language or cultural systems stable enough to provide a definitive interpretation of texts or rituals arising from those systems?

As we saw above, Kagame is not just a linguistic amateur but a priest trying to detect African difference (*à la* Mudimbe) by claiming identity with Aristotle and Saint Thomas Aquinas. However, in the mind of Derrida (1976), such linguistic models are untenable.[66] Derrida argues that most of the structuralist methodology fits within the 'science of signs' or semiotics. This science is not possible because we cannot have such stable meanings, and no definitive meaning of a text can ever be established. The very notion of a 'definitive meaning' implies certain unproven (and unprovable) assumptions about texts and language. Derrida's deconstructive method is to lay bare these assumptions about language, to 'question' the text about possible multiple meanings, and in so doing to show what he calls 'the free play of signifiers'. By this, Derrida implies that the writer of the word 'privileges' the word for a moment. This 'privileging' becomes the medium for the play of the signifier—difference—rather than any background of a fixed linguistic system, which according to Derrida does not exist. This reminds us of the Heraclitan tradition that 'you cannot step into the same river twice'. For Heraclitus, everything is subject to becoming or change. In the context of Derrida's critique, it would mean 'you cannot step into the same language twice'.

From Derrida's perspective, meaning is a process that is always relational and fluctuating. It is always inside a context and not outside. Given that meaning can occur only as experience, our experiences are constantly overriding ('overwriting') the lexical definitions of words, effacing those definitions, which in turn are constantly changing. A printed dictionary, for example, gives the false impression that language has stable meanings,

[66] Derrida's thought on language and meaning is clearly expressed in the second chapter, entitled 'Linguistics and Grammatology'.

whereas those meanings are always ‘at play’ and in a flux. The use of a word not only goes beyond the dictionary definitions but also ‘effaces’ those forces at work(thing-in-itself)that act just beyond the horizon of consciousness(Derrida 1976). Hence, from the perspective of deconstruction, contrary to what Kagame posits, there are no extra-linguistic connections available to anchor meanings within language.

Kagame’s use of language and his claim to final interpretation, in Derrida’s view, is hegemonic and borders on the ridiculous. It gives us the erroneous impression that Kinyarwanda culture is fixed, unique, and self-evident. Derrida tries to break down the binary system that privileges terms which are implicit in assumptions embedded within language systems. He suggests that in the use of language, the first term in a group of two is given pride of place. In distinctions like male/female, white/black, mind/body, master/slave, sign/signified, the first term is always privileged. In the view of Derrida, this is not correct because the first term has meaning only in relation to, and only because of, the second term. A master can be a master only if there are slaves. The existence of the master is dependent on the existence of the slave. This suggests that existence is depicted as the dynamic interactivity of its manifestations. In other words, one cannot perceive of a master unless one thinks of him in terms of his determining relationship with a slave. That is to say, the existence of a master is intelligible only by affirming the existence of a slave. This also suggests that our use of language should not be closed systems of absolutely certain, transcendental concepts. It suggests that meaning is relational and always fluctuating. This implies that we do not need to focus on binary opposites or establish axiological hierarchies, but can think them together or approach them in a creative, re-configuring manner. Given the interactions evident in the world today, language ought to be open-minded, changeable, and incomplete, and not consist of radically opposed entities or be couched in such fixed categories as Kagame wants us to see.

Moreover, language as a means of conceiving being is highly problematic, given migrations and intercultural encounters in our contemporary world. This is because there are many languages, and people may be able to change languages and speak in several different ones. This implies that language is not innate or ontological; rather, it is acquired. We do not have a fixed way of conceiving the world. The use of fixed and stable categories gives the mistaken impression that identity is stable. Sartre argues that existence comes before essence. I exist before I define my identity, and no specific essence defines what it is to be human. Even the use of a word at one moment implies at least a slightly different background context than the use of the same word at another moment. This brings a difference in meaning, and

what this difference is can never be pinned down because even to ask a question about a change in meaning is to change a meaning. This, according to Heidegger (1996), is an inauthentic mode of communicating. Foucault (1966) too argues that language is a truth unto itself, speaking nothing other than its own meaning. Nothing truly meaningful is ever said or allowed to be said. Authentic existence is not in language but in caring for the beings in the world, given that we are essentially temporal beings.

Kagame's study of thought and language ought to take into consideration thinking in terms of rhizomes rather than trees. French philosophers Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) and Felix Guattari (1930–1992) think that if philosophers approach things as rhizomes, they will come up with a very different picture of how things really are. Rhizomes are plants that tend to grow horizontally rather than vertically. Rather than sending their roots deep into the ground, and rather than being clearly unified and distinct entities, rhizomes spread out, growing up and all over things that are in their way, getting tangled up with other rhizomes. This implies multiplicity in language, unlike the tree-approach to language, which sees reality as one, discrete entity. Approaching language in terms of rhizomes would also lead us to consider not just language itself but also other things such as voice and the body, which are intertwined with our use of language.

Furthermore, when Kagame breaks down Kinyarwanda into categories (nouns, verbs, adjectives), it may not correctly reflect the way we speak. We rarely speak clearly, as we stutter, mumble and leave some sentences incomplete. A rhizomatic approach to language, in the mind of Deleuze and Guattari, makes us see language as just one among many languages. Deleuze and Guattari recommend against limiting things to one tree and to discrete entities, and against considering them in abstraction from their relations with other things. We should work from interactions that form a multiplicity.

Kagame's approach is quite similar to what southern African intellectuals have done with *ubuntu/hunhu* philosophy.[67] They see *ubuntu* as a key concept to evoke unadulterated

[67] See, for example, Ramose (1999). The word *ubuntu* is used here in the morphological, linguistic sense. It is derived from coupling the prefix (*ubu-*, which in the Nguni languages of southern Africa gives rise to abstract words and concepts) to the general root (*-ntu*, which stands for 'human'). Hence, in general terms, *ubuntu* simply means 'being human, humanity, the act of being human'. In the Nkoya language of central Zambia, for example, the following forms appear: *shintu* ('human'), *muntu* ('a human'), *bantu* ('humans, people'), *wuntu,* ('human-ness, the quality of being human'). Among the Bakweri of the southwest region of Cameroon, there is also a similarity. *Moto* means a 'human, a person', and *wato* is plural, meaning 'humans, persons'. For more critical discussion of *ubuntu*, see Chapter 7.

forms of African social life before the European conquest. The worldview (in other words, the values, beliefs, and images) of pre-colonial southern Africa is claimed to survive today, in remote villages and intimate kin relationships, and constitute an inspiring blueprint for the future of social, economic, and political life. As a form of African philosophy, *ubuntu* brings out African potentials such as music and dance, orality and orature, kingship, healing rituals, and other cultural achievements from which the rest of humanity could benefit (Ramose 1999). The concept of *ubuntu* is not very different from an ideology of blackness such as négritude, which is a reaction of black agency to various forms of structural and epochal oppression. Zambian humanism and *ujamaa* do not explicitly essentialize Africans as black but as constituting a particular, benevolent, reciprocity-based village society that can also inspire in modern times.

Nevertheless, the use of language to describe the worldview as 'the southern African indigenous philosophy of *ubuntu*', in the view of van Binsbergen (2001a,2003) is an *etic* imposition of an alien North Atlantic globalized analytical model, which produces just a spurious illusion of local knowledge. Mudimbe (1998) thinks of *ubuntu* as the liberation of difference from the hegemony of white expatriate clergy. He coined the term *rétrodiction* ('speaking backwards'), to describe African clerical intellectuals like Kagame and Mveng who engage in revisiting and romanticizing the past. He maintains that they reconstructed a pre-colonial, pre-Christian, African village-based life-world, in which they themselves no longer lived or believed, and which was yet dear to them as a source of pride and inspiration. In Mudimbe's case, *rétrodiction*, as a search for African historical religion and African self-affirmation, no longer has much room for African historical religion but largely remains at home in the North Atlantic region.

2.10. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to present a review of the debate on ethnophilosophy by exploring the main aspects of the work of Tempels and Kagame. They wanted to show that the indigenous African has a philosophy. Tempels lived with the Baluba for years like an ethnographer and wanted to present the realities of his experiences. He attributed to the Bantu an ontology that he conceived as the 'vital force'. This ontology has its own internal coherence and permeates the life of every Bantu-speaker. The universe has its own interrelation of forces within the realm of existence, which contrasts with that of the European. Kagame tries to argue for an indigenous Bantu philosophy by using language. The

linguistic analyses of Kagame present a major challenge for intercultural philosophy. Language is not a content or product of thought, but at best a prerequisite and carrier of thought. Moreover, we cannot totally rely upon the conception of a unique Bantu philosophy. That notwithstanding, these authors' thoughts have opened up further avenues in the field of research in African philosophy. The wider implications of ethnophilosophy will be the focus of the next chapter.

3

FROM ETHNOPHILOSOPHY TO PHILOSOPHIC SAGACITY

3.1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on the implications of ethnophilosophy in relation to the main articulations of African philosophy today. I posit that the major aspects of African philosophy today revolve around Tempels, in the sense that his work provided a conceptual framework and reference for all future attempts to formulate the constitutive elements of a distinctive African mode of thought. His efforts to construct an original African philosophical system, as we can now see, have led to a plurality of trends.[68] The views of some scholars on the limitations of ethnophilosophy will be discussed, with special emphasis on Oruka's criticisms. It is important to see how various criticisms of ethnophilosophy gave rise to Oruka's conception of philosophic sagacity. I laid emphasis on ethnophilosophy in Chapters 1 and 2 because it dominated African philosophy throughout the late 1960s through to the 1970s. This was when African philosophy was attempting to ground itself in mainstream academic philosophy. Prior to and during this period, discussions regarding what African philosophy was were dominated by the views of the ethnophilosophers and their critics.[69] Hence, there is the need to provide a picture of the intellectual climate in a bid to show how philosophic sagacity and intercultural philosophy form part of a chain of intellectual events in African philosophy.

[68] Neugebauer (1990) lists six main currents: 1. The Christian–linguistic approach; 2. The collective hermeneutical approach and the classical African socialism; 3. The individual-hermeneutical approach; 4. The phenomenological approach; 5. The linguistic approach; and 6. The apologetic approach. Mudimbe (1988) identifies three trends: 1. The philosophical critique of ethnophilosophy; 2. The foundational trend; and 3. Philological studies, critical anthropology, and hermeneutics. For more on the trends, see Maurier (1976); Tshiamalenga (1981); and Oruka (1990a).

[69] See, for example, Griaule (1949[1965]); Kagame (1956); Tempels (1959); Senghor (1964); Crahay (1965); Horton (1967); Mbiti (1970); and Towa (1971b).

3.2. Main criticisms of ethnophilosophy

In this section, I focus on the main criticisms of Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy*.[70]
Barry Hallen (2006), from an analytical stance, describes the highly problematic nature of ethnophilosophy in African philosophy when he states that:

> Ethnophilosophy is a four-lettered word, an intellectual invective. I do not know of anyone in African philosophy today who voluntarily identifies themselves as an ethnophilosopher. It is a category invoked by a critic when he wants to express disapproval of the work of someone in African philosophy. (Hallen 2006: 138)

John Mbiti asserts that Tempels' contribution is more visible in terms of sympathy and a radical change of attitude than perhaps in the actual content of his book. Mbiti also expresses doubts about the dynamic conception of Bantu ontology (Mbiti1971: 132). Okot p'Bitek, from a Nilotic-speaking and so non-Bantu-speaking background in Uganda, attacks Tempels' methodology as having been erected through intuition and not by methods of direct observation and comparative analyses of data. This possibly accounts for why Tempels attempts to prescribe a common Bantu ontology:[71]

> Tempels invites us to accept this thought-system, not only as Bantu, but as African. Can serious […] scholars concerned with a correct appraisal and analysis of African beliefs and philosophy afford this kind of generalization? (Okot p'Bitek 1973: 59)

However, I think that Okot p'Bitek misconstrues Tempels' position. Tempels wrote only of the Baluba. Therefore, he did not intend the generalizations imputed to him. *Bantu Philosophy* does not pretend to speak for *all* Bantu-speaking groups, but for the Baluba as a Bantu-speaking group. Bantu is a very large language group in the first place, extending from Cameroon to the Cape; hence it does not have a single cultural orientation. Yet, even though it does not have a common cultural orientation, the speaking of an underlying common proto-language (Bantu) could possibly imply the adherence to a common worldview. It could also suggest at least a converging substrate cosmology and culture in notions of sorcery, authority,

[70] For more criticisms of ethnophilosophy, see Mudimbe (1988) and Neugebauer (1990).

[71] See also Tshiamalenga (1981: 179).

the family, kinship, time and space, God, and so on. Tempels took the Baluba as a specimen, but he was very aware of differences between languages and between cultural groups in Africa, given the investment missionaries had to make in every new African language they encountered. Moreover, as we earlier mentioned, Tempels was neither an ethnologist nor an anthropologist, nor even a professional philosopher.

Tshiamalenga Ntumba, the philosopher from former Zaire (today the Democratic Republic of Congo), levels three specific criticisms at Tempels. First, one cannot claim that because the Baluba perceive the world as expressions of the reality of force that force is being. Second, one cannot constitute an ontology on the basis of external signs. Moreover, it does not make sense when Tempels identifies the Bantu notion of force with the Western notion of being. Third, linking force and being is imitation since it is unthinkable without the Western conceptual tools Tempels used. Hence, Tshiamalenga contends that Tempels constructed his own individual philosophy but did not *reconstruct* Bantu philosophy (Tshiamalenga 1981: 179).[72]

The Belgian philosopher Franz Crahay provided the first philosophical critique proper of Tempels. Using a metaphor from aeronautic vocabulary, conceptual taking-off (*décollage conceptuel*), he asserts that Tempels and his disciples have not made a distinction between a 'vision of the world', and philosophy proper. At best, what Tempels and his disciples have provided can be regarded as a meta-theory on the Bantu worldview (Crahay 1965:64-65). Crahay judges that Tempels' use of philosophical terminology is vague on specific notions such as metaphysics, ontology, and psychology (ibid. 63). He sees an additional weakness in the title of Tempels' book (*Bantu Philosophy*) as confusing intellectually the vulgar meaning of philosophy as lived (*vécu)* with its strict, reflective (*réflexif)* meaning. Crahay conceives of philosophy as an explicit, analytical discourse, radically critical and autocritical, and systematic (ibid.). He thinks philosophy as intellectual practice has to be different from uncritical descriptions of the worldviews, traditions, wisdom, and languages of a people. He outlines the methodological confusion in ethnophilosophy in the following way:

> Let us speak frankly: If we do not want to compromise the very project of philosophy in Africa, confusing the technical use of this term with its vulgar use, and reduce philosophy to a simple vision of the world, we must say that until the present there has not been a Bantu philosophy. What exists surely is a cohesive and original view of

[72] Towa (1971b) and Hountondji (1996) develop a similar argument.

> the world particular to Bantus, a kernel of wisdom. Given an ensemble of favorable circumstances, it could have brought about earlier a real philosophy. (ibid. 68)

Crahay, who made the importation into Africa of professional Western philosophy his livelihood, could only have presented things that way. Now we are half a century later and such an idealized understanding of philosophy needs a re-thinking. There is room for interculturality wherein philosophy does not preclude human realities and encounters. If we take Crahay seriously, it means we would reduce philosophy to just analysis and not life issues. This probably explains his 'conceptual taking-off'.[73] This would be absurd because we would reject its history and the traditions from which it generated.

The Cameroonian philosopher Eboussi-Boulaga argues that Tempels' hypothesis in Bantu ontology is not only ambiguous but, in the end, downgrades the *muntu* to the uncivilized, with no moral qualities and completely governed by an order of forces (Eboussi-Boulaga 1968: 19-20). Eboussi-Boulaga also presents the socio-historical contradictions of Tempels' treatise when he likens the socio-economic hierarchy in the colonial context to the ontological hierarchy of the forces (ibid. 24-25).

Marcien Towa, in two complementary booklets,[74] in a general evaluation of the works of some ethnophilosophers such as Tempels and Kagame, links the critique of ethnophilosophy to négritude's political ambivalence. Négritude as an expression of ethnophilosophy produces an illusory consciousness in one's cultural identity, which is conceived to be different from others and is an extension of the ideology of neo-colonialism (Towa 1971b: 24-25).[75] He also flaws ethnophilosophy on methodological and technical

[73] Crahay's possibility of a conceptual taking-off (*décollage conceptuel*) provoked much debate in African philosophical circles. Hountondji (1983: 192), for example, does not think Crahay's metaphor makes sense as a condition of possibility for the existence of an African philosophy. He considers that the 'take-off' has already taken place in African philosophy. Given that all people think conceptually in all civilizations, such a 'take-off' is always accomplished even when human actors incorporate mythological sequences into their discourse. In this light, one could compare Parmenides' discourse to those of Confucius, Plato, Hegel, Nietzsche, Kagame, etc.

[74] Towa (1971a, 1971b).

[75] Négritude is a literary, ideological movement developed by Francophone Black intellectuals, writers, and politicians in France in the 1930s. This group included the future Senegalese president Leopold Sedar Senghor, the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, and the Guianian Léon Damas. This group taught that solidarity in a common Black identity was an efficient tool against French colonial racism. They believed that the shared Black heritage of members of the African Diaspora would help in fighting against French political and intellectual hegemony

grounds. He brings forth two controversies in ethnophilosophy's *démarche*: first, its attempt to think that philosophy is culturally relative; second, confusing ethnology with philosophy. As such, Towa beckons us to consider ethnophilosophy as an ideology whose methodology betrays both philosophy and anthropology. He also argues that African philosophy has its sources in the past, in what its proponents claim to be an 'authentic' African past:

> What ethnophilosophy praises in the past is not necessarily given by the analysis of the past. Retrojection is the method by which ethnophilosophy alters and disfigures traditional reality by secretly introducing at the descriptive onset present-day values and ideas which can be considered completely alien to Africa, rediscovering them in a militant profession of faith, 'authenticated in terms of their so-called Africanity'. (ibid. 32)

Towa's critique of ethnophilosophy is quite similar to the critique made by critics such as Boele van Hensbroek and van Binsbergen of African renaissance and *ubuntu.* They think *ubuntu* does not describe an *emic*-authentic, pre-colonial traditional African culture. Rather, *ubuntu* philosophy is a remote *etic* recreation by scholars who interpret and analyse aspects of village life in many contexts and then present it as the 'philosophy' of the contemporary southern African culture. We earlier saw Mudimbe criticizing African clerical intellectuals by using *rétrodiction*, a term similar to Towa's *rétrojection*.

Furthermore, Towa argues that most of the works of ethnophilosophers coincide with theology. He cites the cases of Roman Catholic priests such as Tempels, Kagame, and Mulago, and Protestant pastors such as John Mbiti and Jean Bahoken.[76] For him, their positions as priests and pastors push their preoccupations in the direction of theology and not philosophy as such. With such theological absorption, the concept of philosophy is broadened to co-exist with culture. When philosophy is so broadened to co-exist with culture, it can lead to the disappearance of philosophy. In this way, Christian dogma is inserted into African tradition so that it loses its foreign cast in the face of any nationalist who wants to be proud of his cultural identity (Towa 1981:342).

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and domination. They formed a realistic literary style and formulated their Marxist ideas as part of this movement.

[76] Hountondji (1983: 58-59) also makes the same observation and develops a similar argument.

Towa's critique captures the reality of the Africanization or adaptation of European Christianity.[77] Nevertheless, his judgement does not take into consideration the underlying transformation of that religion within African soil. Mudimbe's *Tales of Faith: Religion as Political Performance in Central Africa* discusses clerical intellectualism as an 'incomprehensible miracle' for the liberation of African difference.[78] Mudimbe, unlike Towa, extensively shows that the link between philosophy and theology is not merely a disadvantage. In the same vein, van Binsbergen (2005a) points to Roman Catholicism as one of the unexpected pillars of African philosophy. Secondly, to claim that philosophy cannot co-exist with culture is to create an inherent opposition between the two. Implicitly, Towa is taking Western 'culture' as standard and universal, but this is inherently incorrect and hegemonic. It is not by accident that two of the most prominent texts in the recent history of African philosophy have as titles *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Wiredu 1980) and *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Appiah 1992). In our study, we do not propose one 'culture' over the other but explore the possibilities of cross-fertilization between the various cultural orientations and traditions of thought.

Hountondji's philosophical critiques of ethnophilosophy have made the debate an international one.[79] He reveals that Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* was meant for a foreign audience in a bid to satisfy ideological aspirations. The methodology of Tempels and his disciples is flawed because they tend to portray African beliefs as things of the past that do not change, that are somehow eternal. Moreover, African traditional systems of thought do not leave room for argumentation or innovation in the quest for the truth. Hence, it becomes unacceptable to interpret a static body of oral literature or traditions and label it 'philosophy'.

Hountondji also contends that ethnophilosophy presents itself as that of peoples rather than individuals. Ethnophilosophy speaks only of *Bantu* philosophy, *Dogon* philosophy, *Bakweri* philosophy; as such, its scope is collective, tribal, and of the worldview variety:

> Indeed, *Bantu Philosophy* did open the floodgates to a deluge of essays which aimed to reconstruct a particular *Weltanschauung*, a specific world-view commonly attributed to all Africans, abstracted from history and change and, moreover, *philosophical*, through an interpretation of the customs and traditions, proverbs and

[77] See also Mudimbe (1988: 152).

[78] See also van Binsbergen (2005) for an extensive critique of this argument.

[79] Most of Hountondji's criticisms of ethnophilosophy have been collected into his book *Sur la philosophie africaine*(1977), and its English version, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (1983).

> institutions—in short, various data—concerning the cultural life of African peoples. (Hountondji 1983: 34)

Hountondji's attempt at the refutation of Tempels and his disciples is untenable. This is because he is obsessed with classical individual-centred rationality. He does not take into account the ways in which social institutions and social processes structure and restrain individual consciousness, impose and warp judgement, contaminate it with collective representations. Hountondji's view of the individual and peoples is monolithic in that it is full of much consistent rationality in the individual. The notion of African peoples living in communities today is full of complexities. Hence, Hountondji needs a re-thinking here.

Hountondji, like Towa, also questions the oral sources of ethnophilosophy. Since these oral sources are not philosophical in the technical sense of the word, it becomes evident that a scholar like Tempels or Kagame interprets or analyses them to give them a philosophic status. For Hountondji, this is an ideological myth because it has to account for an imaginary unanimity, to interpret a text that nowhere exists and has to be constantly reinvented. This explains why he thinks 'Bantu philosophy' is not the philosophy of the Bantu but that of Tempels, and the 'Bantu-Rwandais philosophy' is not that of the Rwandais but that of Kagame. Both Tempels and Kagame, Hountondji asserts, simply make use of African traditions and oral literature and project onto them their own philosophical beliefs (ibid.62).[80] I will respond to the criticisms of Hountondji later.

Christian Neugebauer identifies some glaring contradictions at the theoretical-methodological level. Tempels posits that the uncivilized African, the 'pagan', does not change.

> Why does not the African change? How is it that the pagan, the uncivilised is stable? Because the pagan founds his life upon the traditional groundwork of his theodicy and ontology […]. (Tempels 1959:26)

[80] Hountondji's criticisms of ethnophilosophy prompted lively debates throughout Africa on the definition of African philosophy. Oruka (1990, 1991), contrary to Hountondji, sets out to prove that in traditional Africa there have been individuals, non-literate sages, who are rational, critical, and reflective. Hallen and Sodipo also identify traditional healers ormasters of medicine as sages among the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria. For more on this debate see, for example, Oruka (1972) and Hallen & Sodipo (1986).

It follows from Tempels' view that the 'pagan' holds a static ontology, which guarantees him a metaphysical sheet-anchor independent of any given social conditions. Conversely, the alleged Bantu ontology determines the social conditions, which are dependent on the former. Yet, regarding an ontology as static (this being inferred from the fact that the ontology in question is the foundation of the pagan's static 'form of life')[81] is irreconcilable with holding that the very same ontology is dynamic, as does Tempels when he states:

> We hold a static conception of 'being', they are dynamic. (Tempels 1959:51)

Secondly, Neugebauer sees another contradiction in the way Tempels compares the Bantu-speaker and the European notion of being. Tempels' view that Bantu philosophy implies a dynamic view of being is, unlike so-called 'European philosophy', expressed in the statement: 'Force is being, being is force'. It remains all the same if Tempels is postulating that the 'European' notion of being is, at least, equivalent to the 'Bantu' one. This is because he says: 'the notion of force takes for them the place of the notion of being in our philosophy' (ibid.52).

The argument above urges Neugebauer to question the impossibility of explaining how a *per definitionem* stable notion of being can be equivalent to a dynamic one. Moreover, the phrase 'force is being, being is force' can be reduced by itself to the plain tautology 'being is being, being is being'. This is because, as Tempels earlier explained, the notion of 'force' serves the same function and occupies the same position within Bantu philosophy as the notion of 'being' within so-called European philosophy. Finally, one may ask how Tempels managed to attain the epistemological miracle of recognizing any dynamic quality of being at all, given that the totality of the conception of being within 'European philosophy', to which Tempels belongs, is static.[82] Furthermore, one can cast doubt on

[81] The concept 'form of life' is borrowed from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations.* This concept is used to connote the linguistic, historical, sociological, and behavioural determinants which make up the situation or environment in which a given language has meaning.

[82] Neugebauer may see this as an 'epistemological miracle', but I think it is not quite so. Tempels identified himself with the Bantu; and in this encounter, he spotted this dynamic, alternative logic. He had 'real' experiences with the Bantu and had a personal belief in their reality and effect. I think Tempels did not project himself or transfer his experiences from the hegemonic North. He did not identify himself with the Bantu-speakers as a mere survival strategy. He identified himself with and was taught by them. This intercultural

whether Tempels had a firm grasp or by any means a comprehensive knowledge of the history of European philosophy. This is because Cicero, the Roman scholar, had already stated the dictum: 'force = being', such that the announcement of the uniqueness of a Bantu philosophy should not be considered as correct.

The ideological critique of Tempels' work stems from its implied racialist and paternalistic ideology of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and imperialism—which merely follows the common spirit of North Atlantic society at the time. Aimé Césaire, for example, denounced the neo-colonial character of Tempels' work. He likens it to creating a diversion, a way of diverting attention 'from the fundamental political problems of the Bantu peoples by fixing it on the level of fantasy', remote from the corrosive effects of colonialism (Hountondji 1983:37). Césaire's work is historically and empirically based on the worldview of the Baluba, a people with whom he lived between 1933 and 1940. These people, like those in other African countries, had suffered untold but well-known pains under colonial rule.[83]

The views advanced by Neugebauer and Césaire are pertinent, but they do not see the inner struggle Tempels goes through. Tempels finds himself in the struggle to be allowed to approach the Baluba culture, with a total commitment, on the conditions proper to that culture, regardless of the preconceived, externally imposed images and stipulations of his own society of origin (Belgium), its academic culture, the world of the missions and the church. It is in this struggle between the various commitments unified inside Tempels, and his notion of the vital force, that I find so interesting in Tempels.

3.3. Oruka's criticisms of ethnophilosophy

In this section, I will discuss the main criticisms Oruka levels against ethnophilosophy. I will also re-assess the views of the American philosopher Gail Presbey, who engaged in sage philosophy research with Oruka and has published extensively on his project.[84]

I have decided to treat Oruka's critique of ethnophilosophy separately because it will give us a clearer picture of his rationale for endorsing philosophic sagacity in contemporary

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encounter greatly transformed Tempels and perhaps explains the 'epistemological miracle'. He benefitted from his Baluba friends because he opened himself to their perceptions, values, and beliefs.

[83] Nzongola Ntalaja (1987: 113-14), for example, recalls the atrocities committed by Belgian paternalism in collaboration with the so-called 'traditional rulers' in the former Belgian Congo (today's Democratic Republic of Congo).

[84] See Presbey (1996, 1997, 1999, 2002, 2007).

African philosophy. It is interesting to note that even though Oruka, like other professional philosophers, insists on the universalizing perspective in philosophy, he argues that there is and must be a difference between African and Western philosophy. He argues, contrary to Hountondji, that indigenous illiterate Africans can also be called philosophers like Plato, Descartes, or Sartre.

According to Oruka, ethnophilosophy is more mythology and ethnology than philosophy proper (Oruka 1972, 1975). In his ironic title, *Mythologies as African Philosophy* (1972*)*, Oruka posits that mythologies should not be regarded as part of philosophy. He also draws a distinction between debased and exact usage of the term philosophy:

> When one uses philosophy in the debased form one might (rightly) substitute mythology for philosophy. (Oruka1997:28)

This is what Tempels and his disciples did, according to Oruka, when they used philosophy in the debased form. Consequently, their works do not contain philosophy but mythologies. He refers to Tempels' notion of vital force as a 'mythical and ugly phrase' (ibid. 30). For Oruka, ethnophilosophy confused African mythologies with African philosophy, thereby portraying what African philosophy should not be. He laments that these mythological, ethnological, and religious writings 'have so far been causing us trouble' in identifying African philosophy. This is what he proposes to ethnophilosophers:

> Although those writings may have played a role in initiating authentic philosophical works in Africa, the most they can now be offered is '*thanks*'; but it would be too much to offer them the philosophically serious title of 'African philosophy'. (Oruka 1975:53)

Oruka's conception of myths is superficial, as opposed to our presentation in Chapter one. Is Oruka referring to the myths of stupid savages, as propounded by racialist North Atlantic scholars, or to African myths as imperfectly studied yet essential underpinnings of African life? If properly approached, the insight myths give is profound, not superficial, and is a royal road to transcultural understanding.

According to Oruka, ethnophilosophy cannot even be regarded as a meta-theory of a worldview, because it is thwarted by the *emic–etic* problem (Oruka 1991:24-25). He uses Ludwig Wittgenstein's view of religious belief and Willard van Oman Quine's

'indeterminacy thesis of radical translation' as possible supporters of the ethnophilosophical thesis. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein argues that the non-believer cannot understand the believer. The believer has a completely different 'form of life' from that of the non-believer,[85] and the believer and non-believer participate in different forms of life that have no essential relationship to one another. Each language-game is logically distinct from another.[86] The language of faith or commitment of the believer is inexpressible and unintelligible in that of the non-believer. This is because each of them plays a different language-game.

Oruka's use of Wittgenstein is interesting and impressive, but Wittgenstein's basic fallacy is that he considers religion as an act of faith, a commitment to a truth claim, in the first place. Secondly, experience with African religion also shows his claim to be wrong. Religion is not just limited to knowing doctrinal elements; religion also helps in social identification with co-religionists, implying that it takes social and political dimensions. At the existential level, African religion, for example, is not just limited to faith but extends to therapeutic benefits and sociability in the community which this form of religion generates (van Binsbergen 1981). It is not totally true that the non- believer cannot understand the believer. As with the case of all transboundary/intercultural understanding, the non-believer may in some ways understand the believer, while in other ways such understanding is impossible for him/her.

Wittgenstein's analogy between the believer and the non-believer can be extended to the relation between an insider in traditional African philosophy and the outsider who analyses or describes this philosophy in the language of Western thought. From this point of view, Oruka asserts that the two (i.e. insider/outsider) cannot meaningfully express their thoughts to each other. It would be absurd to find that one can be an expert in the thought of the other (Oruka 1991:25). Oruka's use of this argument is in need of some modification, because it is an exaggeration. There is no absolute difference in thought between the insider and the outsider. The insistence on such difference would deny the possibilities of any valid transcultural representation of knowledge.

American philosopher W.V.O. Quine (1908–2000) has a similar view to that of Wittgenstein in one of his most famous books, *Word and Object*. Quine's thesis is that there

[85] See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell & Mott (1968, sec. 23, p. 11).

[86] Ibid. sec. 7, p. 5.

are no culturally universal meanings or propositions. This suggests that the ontological–epistemological status of meanings cannot be explored or analysed outside of the context in which human beings speak or act. Consequently, behaviour is the determinant of meaning within a language. It is therefore not possible to unequivocally translate and compare theoretical concepts between radically different languages.

Nevertheless, inasmuch as the Wittgenstein–Quine distinction supports the tenets of ethnophilosophy, ethnophilosophers are denied their own thesis. Oruka asserts:

> For if their thesis is correct, then the authors are not themselves capable of understanding, let alone rationalizing the nature of African philosophy. And this is because, so far, all of them (whether Europeans or Africans) have championed what they term 'African philosophy' by terminologies given in Western scholarship. None, so far, has given out what is to be treated as the language of African philosophy. Their very concept, 'vital force,' is, if they are to be consistent, 'a Western notion': it is a concept by postulation, not intuition. (Oruka 1991:24-25)

Oruka's assertion gives the impression that Quine's thesis is about impossibility. It is not. It is rather about indeterminacy—in other words, about the same distortion of representation. A distorted picture of a person may still be recognized as representing that person. In addition, it cannot be the person because it is merely a representation. Furthermore, what Quine and Wittgenstein postulate has nothing to do with the contents of African philosophy, but with the possibility of its valid rendering in discursive academic French or English prose. It is not totally impossible to get intercultural knowledge. Even though that possibility is limited, it is there. If, then, it turns out that African philosophy has a logic similar to or identical with Western logic, that is a further step, to be determined by ordinary methods of hermeneutics. However, it is far from impossible that we will find, as Wiredu (1990, 1996) and Hallen and Sodipo (1986) claim, that African and Western logic are one or not so different after all.

3.4. Presbey's attempt at greater precision

Oruka contends that philosophic sagacity is a philosophy in traditional Africa that is different from ethnophilosophy, in spite of the latter being a major trend in African philosophy.[87] Presbey adds some pertinent precision as far as these distinctions are concerned. First, the sages are critical, reflective, rigorous, and dialectical. Critical evaluation in Oruka's sage philosophy has two roles. In the first instance, sages themselves engage in critical evaluation of their thoughts; and in the second, the professional philosopher engaged in the project may comment on what the sages say, during or after the interview (Presbey 2002, 2007). By critical evaluation, the sages indulge in what she terms 'progressive modernization'—that is, making a synthesis of traditional and modern African values. They decide what ideas and values to preserve or jettison, and they give their reasons. While sages are the 'present-day exemplars of our ancestral philosophers', that does not mean that they are untouched by the many changes and cultural influences found in contemporary Africa (Wiredu 1996). Moreover, professional philosophers who interview sages or read the interviews engage in a second layer of critical evaluation. Hence, for Presbey, the sages and professional philosophers are engaged in judgement and synthesis.

Second, philosophic sagacity is based on the thoughts of identifiable individuals. This is different from ethnophilosophy, which implies that traditional Africa is free from philosophic, rational discourse and personalized philosophical activity. In presenting each of the sages, Oruka gives a brief biographical sketch, a photograph, and then the interview with the sage. This approach is in contrast with ethnophilosophy, where the thoughts of informants (often anonymous) are presented in a bid to search for a common denominator. Ethnophilosophy lays more emphasis on collective thought and looks for meaning in collective practices. It tends to downplay the dynamics of culture and the role of cultural criticism. In this context, philosophy here is treated as a general communal activity in which ready-made beliefs and emotions rather than reflection decide the outcome (Oruka 1991:47).[88] Presbey (2007) adds, in her defence of Oruka, that one needs both the individual sage and critical evaluation to constitute a sage philosophy project. She also thinks that the folk sage should be included in the sage philosophy project.

[87] Philosophic sagacity, given its importance, is given an elaborate treatment in the next two chapters of this work.

[88] For more on this distinction, see Ochieng'-Odhiambo (2002b) and Presbey (2007).

3.5. Revisiting the critics of ethnophilosophy

In this section, I make a few comments on some of the major criticisms against ethnophilosophy. I begin with Gail Presbey's. Her opinion is essentially the rationalist one, which helps us to construct ourselves as rational philosophers but does not help us understand culture, ideology, ethics, morality, the appeal of truth, and so on. She induces us to adhere to the dream of constructing valid knowledge along Western modernist lines. We cannot interpret reality and search for wisdom just as abstract reality.

The critique of ethnophilosophy as collective and community-owned, with the incapacity to produce valid philosophy, is untenable and focuses on the debunked anthropological and epistemological fallacy that African historical societies were holistic, self-contained, bounded, integrated, and locally anchored. This view posits a narrow, frozen idea of culture, reducing the African notion of community to an immobile essence. On the other hand, van Binsbergen (2001b) notes that the virtualization of human experience under contemporary conditions of globalization has rendered these previously explanatory models (in terms of the analyses of social formations and fissures), inappropriate. African communities today are trying to forge and sustain new links of community in a bid to overcome various economic and political hurdles. Van Binsbergen widens the epistemological sense of community in Africa from practices that enable them cope with and do away with solitude. African healing cults, anti-sorcery cults, varieties of imported world religions and local transformations thereof are all various avenues for forging and maintaining community. This implies that, contrary to Winch (1964), the rationalization of the processes of constructing community and solidarity need not always be intelligible. The African village that used to be the locus for community is now surpassed by the advent of the virtual village. Hence, Africans have found new ways of constructing communities beyond specific villages.

Secondly, claiming a communal orientation for African traditional life and thought is not specific to Tempels, contrary to what the critics of ethnophilosophy claim. It is a standard notion in anthropology up to the 1950s. Philosophically, it goes back to Lévy-Brühl, with the idea that the African individual is insufficiently developed and is merged with the group and with nature. Tempels simply adopted this established viewpoint. What is new in Tempels is the discovery of the vital force as the hub of Bantu cosmology. In addition, I find Tempels' insight, which cannot easily be dismissed, a good one.

Moreover, if Oruka, Hountondji, and their professional colleagues treat and criticize collectively held worldviews as if they should have been individually developed, original, and personalized philosophy, then all we can ever produce is fallacy. Their criticisms are all based on a confusion of categories and on the fallacies that spring from such a misconception. It is just like trying to use e-mail to communicate with your dog, or instructing the Moon to rise faster.

Hountondji and the critics of ethnophilosophy may also dismiss the idea of a collective philosophy, with unanimity as its accompanying ingredient, as antithetical to philosophy as we know it in the Western tradition since Thales. Nevertheless, their conception is a sort of armchair philosophizing, and this does not take into consideration the social foundation of belief and cosmology. There is an underlying fund of shared cosmological views, of which the ontologies propounded by Tempels and Kagame are more or less standardized and distorted representations. Then, upon this fund, there are based numerous local beliefs and cosmologies which diverge in detail, yet converge in their main lines. The divergence means there does not have to be unanimity. Let us take Roman Catholic folk religion from simple, illiterate peasants in Cameroon, Italy, or Argentina, for example. Each believer will have his own specific interpretation, always at some variance with Roman specialist theology, yet they remain recognizable as Catholics. Hence, Hountondji et al. need to re-visit this issue.

I think the position of Tempels and Kagame is rather sounder than Towa, Hountondji, Oruka, and the other critics of ethnophilosophy try to show. These latter critics show a mastery of the Western rationalist philosophical tradition, but cling to the erroneous assumption that it should be the only mode in other non-Western philosophies. The Western tradition of philosophy is only one of several traditions; there is also Indian, Chinese, Persian, Arabic, and Hebrew philosophy—to limit ourselves just to literate traditions. The claim to professionalization that Hountondji and other professional philosophers are making is really nothing but a submission to Western hegemony. This is because in the Western academic conception, philosophy is seen as the product of a unique, individual mind and is text-based. This conception of philosophy is defensible but by no means universal, or the only one. What poses as universal is often just hegemonic. There is, in every society, a set of largely tacit assumptions about the world, about man, which constitute standard tools for interpreting concrete situations and problems. We can draw a caricature of this by imagining people concocting this standard set as the product of some collective mind. The concept of culture, however, helps us out on this point: culture is something like the accumulated, transmitted

receptacle of such converging individual thoughts across the ages. One can say: 'I do not accept as philosophical those ontological orientations implied in a specific culture'; but this is not the only possible position to take. Claiming the opposite is also defensible. Much of Hountondji's so-called final solution to the problem of African philosophy as ethnophilosophy, in my opinion, is largely rhetorical and based on a deliberate misconception, one that insists by all means on ignoring the concept of culture. I find the criticisms of Hountondji, Towa, Oruka, and the other critics of ethnophilosophy overrated and promoted merely for the sake of the triumph of the Western, individual, text-based philosophy that they project. Conversely, if we accept that philosophical elements are implied in a collectively managed and owned worldview (elements such as notions of time, causality, personhood, space, etc.), then the idea of a 'collective philosophy' is more valid than the persistent critique by professional philosophers would lead one to believe.

Moreover, the problem of African philosophy as ethnophilosophy hinges on an understanding of representation. Tempels and Kagame represent something whose independent ontological status (independent from their minds as authors) is contested by the opponents of ethnophilosophy. Yet, these opponents, who attempt to replace ethnophilosophy with professional philosophy, demonstrate that they themselves have no understanding of what representation is. Representation in its diverse forms is central to every field in the social sciences, and perhaps for this reason, the battle between modernism and post-modernism rages savagely on this terrain.

True representation is impossible, as there is always enormous distortion. That does not mean that representation is futile or meaningless. The whole history of Western philosophy, as an academic subject treating the succession of thinkers from Thales to Žižek, is an exercise in representation. No one would claim that we cannot adequately represent Thales or Plato. Yet all existing representations of these figures are critically contested. This suggests focusing not on the generalizable and the unified but on all that difference implies, in a bid to probe into both the difficulties and possibilities of intercultural representation. Why cannot we represent African cosmologies? Whether they are or are not philosophy is quite a different point, depending entirely on how we define philosophy. That can be nominalist and arbitrary, and we must first have an extensive argument on such a definition. At this point, I may agree with Mudimbe (1988:153), when he contests the 'cultural uniqueness' projected by ethnophilosophers. This supposed uniqueness could foster the untenable intercultural assumption that each culture is bounded and different from others in the production of knowledge. We cannot claim, for example, that colonialism and

Christianity have not influenced African ethnophilosophy. Nevertheless, we need to forge ahead beyond North Atlantic hegemony and unique ethnophilosophy in a bid to exploit this enriching intercultural encounter.

3.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to present a review of the wider implications of the debate on ethnophilosophy. Tempels and Kagame are criticized by the so-called professional philosophers on the grounds that the former's approach to the subject of African philosophy is based on the worldview of Africans. However, their criticisms need to be taken with a pinch of salt. The reason for this may be that in attacking ethnophilosophy, professional philosophers have not taken into consideration the historical background and circumstances of its emergence. Moreover, they have not taken account of the fluidity in the meaning of philosophy even in the Western tradition, in which they are so thoroughly schooled. Consequently, they have become so inflexible in their adherence to the conventional Western canons that African philosophy has to follow suit. In the light of recent developments, even within Western philosophy itself, such a position is unjustified. The negative consequence of their attacks was that the so-called ethnophilosophers spent too much time in defence of their own views concerning the nature of African philosophy, leaving the actual task of outlining traditional or cultural philosophy largely undone. Even though Tempels was naively philosophical, that does not make him a fool. He lived with Africans for years like an ethnographer and presented those realities of his experiences. The view by Hountondji, Towa, and Oruka that ethnophilosophy is totally defeated and obsolete is not true. While the professionals pretend to liberate the African mind from the delusions of ethnophilosophy, their game is to submit African thought to Western hegemony. I submit that ethnophilosophy has helped in the development of professional philosophy. Even though it acknowledges difference, it should not enmesh itself in such difference. The ethnophilosopher can imply an African identity, but intercultural philosophy reminds us not to be trapped in that identity. This can be a first step towards a viable African philosophy, which may have a humble particularist origin, but may cease to belong to a specific local African cultural orientation and eventually contribute to shaping a world culture in the making. Ethnophilosophy should be seen as other ethnosciences around the world are, as Sandra Harding (1994, 1997) would have it, and as a basis for a non-relativist unitary epistemology. Every knowledge system implies the notion of the possibility of truth, and of the perpetual quest for truth. This gives us

the possibility to interconnect the uniqueness of local knowledge systems, each containing a portion of what together will converge, beyond their limited domains, into an overarching Truth. Ethnophilosophy should not be replaced or judged by any external brand of philosophy; rather, it should complement other globally available philosophical traditions.

4

SAGE PHILOSOPHY: BASIC QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

In the previous two chapters, we examined academic African philosophy from a historical perspective, with a special critique of ethnophilosophy and the rise of African philosophy. The main gain of the endless and tedious debate on African philosophy as ethnophilosophy has been the recognition of the need (a) to go beyond collective philosophy as worldview, and (b) to make room for academic, individual-based critical philosophy. However, the point was obvious from the beginning: since (a) and (b) are rather different things, there was never the slightest reason why the pursuit of (a) would preclude the parallel, or subsequent, pursuit of (b).This debate, to my mind, is a storm in a teacup. From this controversy a major problem arises: how can we render traditional African philosophy in a deliberate and systematic manner?

Oruka proposes philosophic sagacity to show that African traditional societies had both folk wisdom and critical, personalized philosophical discourse. Oruka believes that he is creating a genuinely novel approach to the discipline that both suits the African context and rebuts the claims of those who insist that the philosophical enterprise in Africa must be a mirror image of philosophy in the West. Oruka's submission brings forth this compound question: what is sage philosophy, and how does one distinguish it from the other forms of philosophy that are available in Africa? This chapter is an attempt to answer this question. We will also look at a methodology for investigating sage philosophy and several extracts from selected Kenyan sages.

Let us now focus on Oruka's philosophic sagacity, in a bid to show how he situated himself in the continental history of African philosophy.

4.2. What is sage philosophy?

As discussed in the introductory chapter, sage philosophy is about indigenous sages whose lives are enmeshed in the folk-cultural milieu of their societies. They have wisdom and great

intellectual acumen in critical deliberations on various issues of fundamental concern to themselves and to members of their society.

According to Oruka:

> Sage philosophy consists of the expressed thoughts of wise men and women in any given community and is a way of thinking and explaining the world that fluctuates between *popular wisdom* (well-known communal maxims, aphorisms and general common sense truths) and *didactic wisdom* (an expounded wisdom and a rational thought of some given individuals within a community). (Oruka 1991: 33)

Hence, sage philosophy refers to the body of thought produced by persons considered wise in African communities and, more specifically, to those who seek a rational foundation for ideas and concepts used by critically examining the justification of those ideas and concepts.

Popular wisdom is generally conformist, while didactic wisdom is at times critical of the communal set-up and popular wisdom. The thoughts can be expressed in writing or they can be unwritten sayings and arguments associated with certain individuals. Sage philosophy is a type of philosophizing by those with no tradition in the art of writing. This explains why in traditional Africa, most of what could pass as sage philosophy remains largely unwritten. The concern in the sage philosophy project is to look for wise persons who are deeply rooted in traditional African culture. Some of these persons may have been partly influenced by the inevitable moral and technological culture of the West; nevertheless, their outlook and cultural belonging remain that of traditional rural Africa.

4.3. Categorization of sagacity

Sagacity or wisdom can be either *sophia* or *phronesis*, two terms associated with Aristotle in his attempt to classify intellectual virtue.[89] *Sophia* pertains to the intellectual ability to theorize the nature of the world and also to discover a causal explanation of its existence. *Sophia* takes into consideration a deliberation concerning universal truth. It is specialist theoretical knowledge within the competence of the philosopher. *Phronesis* or wisdom, on the other hand, is ingenious practical knowledge. This form of wisdom is more pragmatic,

[89] Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics,* 1140a-b, 1141a-b.

because it is linked to action and enables one to decide on a mode of life based on daily experiences.

Oruka does not categorize sagacity into *sophia* and *phronesis* as Aristotle does. As we saw in the introductory chapter, he rather makes two divisions: the folk sage or popular wisdom, and the philosophic sage or didactic wisdom. The folk sage, according to Oruka, is one who has much knowledge about the popular wisdom of their community, but their thoughts do not go beyond this popular wisdom. They may not necessarily have the dexterity or aptitude to employ their personal critical objection to these popular wisdoms. Such a sage is a folk sage as opposed to the second type of sage, the philosophic sage.

The philosophic sage, according to Oruka, may know all the popular wisdom of their community as the folk sage does, but they have the potentiality of making independent critical assessments of what people in their community take for granted. Consequently, while the wisdom of the folk sage stays at the level of philosophy of the first order, that of the philosophic sage is philosophy of the second order, that is, acritical and individual reflection on what is given in the first order.[90] Philosophic sagacity is a reflection of a person who is a sage and a thinker.[91] Philosophic sagacity distinguishes itself from ethnophilosophy in that it is based on a critical reflective individual. Philosophic sagacity maintains that there exist individuals in various African communities who have not had the benefit of contact with so-called Western philosophy but who are nevertheless critical, independent thinkers who guide their thought and judgement by the power of reason and inborn insight, rather than by the authority of communal consensus.

To explore sage philosophy further, let us begin with the place that wisdom occupies in philosophy.

4.4. The relationship between wisdom and philosophy

A close reading of Oruka's sage philosophy project reveals the larger question of the rapport between wisdom and philosophy. In the history of philosophy, philosophers have tried to understand the nature of wisdom and how to attain it. Wisdom has always played a central role in philosophy, and so Oruka's project is not new. Generally, wisdom pertains to the ability to think and act, by the use of knowledge, common sense, understanding, and insight.

[90] Oruka (1991: 34).

[91] Ibid. p. 48.

It pertains to having knowledge and acting correctly in any given situation. Prior to philosophy in the 'formal' sense, the term 'wisdom' was used in several cultures to denote the 'art of living' and to show the different cultural achievements of the past. In the ancient Graeco-Roman, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Biblical traditions, wisdom was an important virtue linked to cosmological and theological worldviews. The history of Western philosophy was engrained in the Pre-Socratic wisdom context, as seen in the teachings of the Seven Sages and Hesiod. We see this in Socrates and Plato, who define philosophy literally as 'the love of wisdom'. In *The Republic*, Plato proposes philosopher kings as those to rule—that is, rulers who know the Form of the Good and also have the courage to act in conformity with it. Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* defines wisdom as knowledge of the causes—that is, knowing why things are in a certain way, which is more profound than just knowing what and how the things are. He also draws a distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge. Stoic philosophy, in turn, reverted to a wisdom-centred stance, as did Neo-Platonists such as Plotinus and Iamblichus.[92] In Continental philosophy, for example, we also see the central role wisdom plays in the works of Dilthey, Heidegger, Sartre, Gadamer, and Ricoeur. From the psychological perspective, Taranto (1989) views wisdom as the recognition and response to human limitation—'knowing that one does not know'—while Kramer (1990) speaks of the 'primary of affect-cognition' relations. Van Binsbergen (2008) identifies the necessity to recognize one's finitude (Dilthey) in intercultural situations. In the field of education, Benjamin Franklin highlights the relevance of character education in the United States of America as training wisdom and virtue. This is what British philosopher Nicholas Maxwell endorses when he argues that knowledge be sought and promoted to acquire wisdom, which he explains as the ability to realize what is of value in life, for oneself and others.

These examples show the variety of wisdom perspectives in the history of philosophy and modern thought in general. Let us examine some approaches to wisdom in Africa.

4.5. Africanist expressions of traditional wisdom

African indigenous peoples express traditional wisdom in various ways. First, this can be done through proverbs, riddles,[93] and other oral genres.[94] We can cite examples of oral

[92] For a more general theoretical perspective on wisdom, see Brown (2005).

[93] Examples of Bakweri riddles are the following: 1) If a cock climbs a tree and lays an egg, will the egg break or bounce? *Answer*: A cock does not lay an egg. 2) I carry my house wherever I go. Who am I? *Answer*: A snail. 3) My head is as heavy as my buttocks. *Answer*: A palm tree. 4) I have a box that cannot be opened by its

African wisdom recorded by such anthropologists as Griaule, highlighting the lessons of the Malian village philosopher Ogotemmêli, and Hallen and Sodipo's *onisegun* among the Yoruba (Hallen & Sodipo 1986),[95] Kai Kresse among the Muslim community in Kenya (Kresse 2007),and Victor Turner's account of the Zambian village diviner Muchona (Turner 1967). In this genre we may cite Oruka's 'sage philosophy' or 'sagacity'-wisdom as one of the most promising in the relatively new field of academic African philosophy.[96] In his study of Gikuyu proverbs,[97] the Kenyan philosopher Gerald Wanjoyi distinguishes between wise 'sapiential' proverbs and those that are philosophical. These proverbs have a 'literal' or 'symbolic' meaning, but require more explanation and interpretation beyond these two levels of meaning than those which more directly speak about the culture and general way of life. For Wanjoyi, wise or sapiential proverbs either literally or symbolically state a universal truth or give practical counsel or advice. A philosophical proverb, as opposed to a sapiential one, is

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owner. *Answer*: My stomach. 5) I hasten my death. *Answer*: Ripe fruits. 6) I meet two people on a journey. When I greet them, the dead one answers but the other does not. *Answer*: Dry grass and fresh grass.

[94]Kai Kresse (2007), for example, explains that he was inspired by Oruka's and Brenners's (1984) approaches in his ethnographic accounts of three Swahili individual thinkers. Yet, unlike Oruka, he focuses on portraying the roles of these local intellectuals within the everyday life of Mombasa's Old Town, according to their own self-conception and that of their fellow citizens (Kresse 2007: 32). He presents three local Muslim intellectuals and some younger thinkers. Ahmed Sheikh Nabhany used poetry to conserve basic Islamic values and the moral values of the Muslim community. Nabhany was active in his proposals for the preservation of a moral code that was losing ground in contemporary society (ibid. 105-138). Ahmad Nassir's poetical moral theory is on *utu* (being human)—how human beings ought to behave in everyday life. His poem *Utenzi wa Mtu ni Utu* sums up a moral code (ibid. 139-175). Kresse also listened to the Ramadan lectures of Sheikh Abdilahi Nassir and considered them a social critique by an Islamic-minded scholar (ibid. 176-207).

[95] The term *onisegun* refers to the professional group in Yoruba society with whose members Hallen and Sodipo worked. Literally, the term may be translated as 'masters of medicine', but in the relevant literature it has been translated as 'herbalists', 'traditional healers', and 'native doctors'—that is, practitioners of non-Western medicine.

[96] Oruka's approach has been carried on by several scholars and by his past MA and PhD students. This can be seen in the works of Gail Presbey, Kai Kresse, and Ochieng'-Odhiambo.

[97]An example of a Gikuyu proverb is the following: 'A tree by the roadside does not lack a scar', meaning that 'anything or anybody that is exposed to other things or people will not fail to display a mark or effect of this exposure or interaction' (Wanjoyi 1997:70-71). On the limitations of political power in Gikuyu society, Wanjoyi (ibid. 207-208) provides two proverbs: 'A leader who does not heed advice is not a leader', and 'He who refuses to obey cannot command'. Another proverb with democratic relevance is this: 'When the people have spoken, it is God who has spoken' (ibid. 246,249), meaning the voice of the people is the voice of God.

a well-known statement in a language, either literal or symbolic, which is easily amenable to further and deeper analysis. According to Wanjoyi:

> philosophical proverbs […] unlike wisdom proverbs […] eschew practical matters and concentrate on stating how things are. (Wanjoyi 1997:40-44)

Wanjoyi is probably taking his lead from Aristotle's influential distinction between specialist theoretical knowledge (*sophia*) and creative practical knowledge (*phronesis*), as outlined above. For Wanjoyi, wisdom is practical and technical, while philosophy is theoretical and speculative. The Kenyan philosopher Dismas Masolo also draws a distinction between technical philosophy and deep wisdom. He maintains, like Oruka, that professional philosophers should limit themselves to academic, technical philosophy and leave out wisdom. Nevertheless, Wanjoyi maintains that this distinction is not cast-iron but plastic, because in his separation of wise and philosophical proverbs the difference is not very clear.[98]

This interrelation between wisdom and philosophy suggests that philosophy is not just theory but also practice, or that *phronesis* is mere wisdom and not philosophy. Kwame Gyekye (1997:3) is correct when he agrues that to think that philosophy is only about theory, not practice, would be to indulge in the worst stereotypes of philosophy as irrelevant ivory-towerism. Gyekye further argues that for Aristotle, the reason we want to know what virtue is, is so that we can become good (Gyekye 1997:13). This explains why some contemporary academic philosophers have tried to reassert wisdom's centrality to philosophy.[99] They suggest that the gap be bridged between academic philosophy and wisdom (Presbey 1999). Haig Khatchadourian (1992) complains of contemporary philosophy's abdication of wisdom, noting in America the 'profound impotence on the part of philosophy to influence the course of public affairs or even the private lives of this country's citizens' (ibid. 25). He calls upon Western philosophers to help create a global consciousness, by increasing mutual interaction and understanding by philosophers in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. Khatchadourian posits that philosophers cannot be spectators from the sidelines of life but once again must become seekers of wisdom (ibid.26, 32). Nielson sees the necessity for sages

[98] See Kimmerle (1997).

[99] See, for example, Khatchadourian (1992); Presbey (1999); and van Binsbergen (2008b).

and philosophers to come together in a bid to provide a guide for the perplexed (Nielson 1993:16).

The second way African indigenous peoples can express traditional wisdom is through symbols and rituals. Werbner (1989) uses the word 'wisdom' when he writes about divination among the Tswapong people of modern Botswana. The diviner uses skills and dialogues in a bid to heal and redress the contradictions in the life of the client. Here, wisdom in the ritual drama during a divination session goes beyond words. Divination sessions permit a client to express their pain, suffering, and distress, and diviners can discuss the causes and conditions of human suffering and then later help to reorganize hope and meaning into the client's life.[100]

Van Beek (2012) gives us a fascinating account of crab divination among the Kapsiki of North Cameroon and the Higi of Nigeria. Among the Kapsiki, diviners are usually blacksmiths, and the most widely known technique of divination is with the crab, even though they have other divination techniques such as one with the whistling bird, one with cowry shells, and another one with stones. For the crab divination, the standard procedure is as follows: A patient comes early in the morning and asks for a consultancy. The smith obliges and gets out his paraphernalia: a large pot (40–50cm diameter) filled with sand, a broken pot for a cover, a jar with one or more crabs, and a sack with sticks and calabash shards of several sorts and with various decorations. He heats up a fire to warm the water for the crab and then pours the lukewarm water into the large pot. Along the rim of the pot he stands straws upright in small bundles with a calabash marker in front of them: these represent the client, the client's family and the various buildings in his compound, the persons he is asking about, and the ward and the village. In the middle of the pot the smith buries a small round fruit (*kwakweme,* i.e. *Strychnosincuwa*), and behind another calabash marker a small cord. He then loosely places five round and six oblong pieces of calabash on the wet sand, each decorated differently. Finally, the smith takes a crab out of a smaller pot that he keeps in his smithy. Holding the crab in his hands, he explains to it the matter at hand and what is expected of it. The crab is put in the pot, the lid is closed, and the client and diviner wait patiently, chatting away amicably. After 15 minutes, the smith looks to see how the crab has rearranged the loose pieces of calabash, interprets this as a first answer, and then asks a more precise question, puts the pieces back in the same order, and lets the crab have

[100] For more on Africa divination see, for example, van Beek (2012,2015); van Beek & Peek (2012); and van Binsbergen (2003).

another go. An entire session involves asking four or five questions and lasts a few hours. The final answer usually offers an analysis of the problem and a means of solving it, often involving a sacrifice of some sort. Sacrifices are usually performed on a sacrificial jar, which is, in fact, a small beer jar with narrow openings, and sacrifices are placed on the exterior of the jar, or the small offerings are placed at a crossroads.

To close the divination séance, the smith puts the crab back in the pot, feeds him some grains of sorghum, pours some water from the divination jar over the feet of the client, and then empties the rest of the jar in the four cardinal directions. The diviner takes the loose pieces out of the jar and the client takes the straws that represent himself and his kin from the rim of the jar. The diviner receives his fee, about FCFA 100, and the client goes home to perform the sacrifice that has been suggested. Finally, the blacksmith rubs some *rhwè jivu* on the crab, a medication to prevent any bad luck that could stem from interacting with people who might be cheating on each other.

In the introductory chapter, I mentioned that van Binsbergen became a *sangoma* (traditional healer). This had a profound impact in his personal and professional life. He explains:

> From an ancestor-less piece of flotsam of human history, I became a priest in an ancestral cult, in a decisive step not only of professional independence and Africanist exploration, but also of self-construction. (Van Binsbergen 2003:193)

He notes:

> [...] *sangomas* are people who consider themselves, and who are considered by their extended social environment, as effective healers: as mediators between living people, on the one hand, and the ancestors, spirits and God (Mwali) on the other—in a general context where most bodily afflictions and other misfortunes of a psychological, social and economic nature, are interpreted in religious terms. (Van Binsbergen 2003:202)

Van Binsbergen suggests that *sangoma* divination is meant to release victims from psychic and existential schizophrenia. In his opinion:

> The aim of *sangoma* divination is primarily therapeutic: to reinsert the client in what may be argued to be her or his proper place in the universe, so that the life force in

> principle available for that person but temporarily blocked by their drifting away from the proper place, can flow once more. (Van Binsbergen 2003:256)

Before consulting his patients, van Binsbergen prepares himself by pouring a libation (a bottle of beer or part of a bottle of wine) on his shrine, and conducts an initial preparatory divination session in order to preview the client, whom usually he has not even seen at this stage. He uses four oracular tablets, each having distinctive marks, and on each tablet the front and back sides are clearly indicated, so that when all four tablets are cast they can produce 16 (2^4) different combinations. Throwing the tablets constitutes a random generator capable of yielding 16 different values. Making a specific inspired choice from among these dimensions or their combination, the diviner interprets after each throw the resulting combination with an explicit verbal pronouncement which triggers specific reactions in the client. These reactions, consciously and subconsciously taken into account by the diviner, again inform the interpretational choice made for the subsequent throw. From the continued series of throws, a coherent story of diagnosis, cause, and remedy then gradually arises, in a subtle dialogue with the client who, however, remains largely unaware of his own input into the dialogue, and instead experiences the oracle increasingly as an independent, non-manipulated, truth-producing authority.

Van Binsbergen not only uses oracular tablets but has been able to translate *sangoma* divination to a modern setting by making use of information and communication technologies. He began consulting by e-mail using this procedure:

> My *sangoma* oracular program happens to be on a stand-alone Macintosh microcomputer without Internet connection. The intake form reaches me on a different, Windows-operated computer where all subsequent e-mail correspondence with the clients is also conducted. I use the keyboard and mouse of the stand-alone computer to enter the meagre details of a client's intake form into the program I have written. A dialogue box appears. I type a question on behalf of the client (gradually, in subsequent throws, creatively refining the question while the client is and remains absent). I press the Enter button activating the computer's random generator facility so as to let one of the sixteen oracular combinations appear. Next, verbally interpreting that combination as a reply to the question, I type the answer onto the dialogue box that appears subsequently. The sequence of question and answers

> combines into an unfolding narrative. After a series of thirty to forty throws, i.e. combinations, the session's narrative approaches its natural conclusion. (Van Binsbergen 2003:240)

Finally, the program produces a full protocol document setting out all the successive throws, questions, and interpreted answers. It provides not only a more or less coherent interpretation (because the successive answers constitute a narrative) of the client's predicament in ancestral and (rarely) witchcraft terms and ritual advice towards its redress, but also extensive and detailed biographical information which the client will recognize as partly correct—even though it was never provided by the client himself on the intake form. The distant client will receive this protocol by e-mail.

We have seen some African expressions of traditional wisdom, such as proverbs, riddles, and divination. Nevertheless, Oruka subscribes to the North Atlantic conception of wisdom and thinks it is the only permissible one. Let us now turn to Oruka's genre of sagacity, which he conceives and privileges as *sophia*. We begin with a brief historical account of the origins of Oruka's sage philosophy as an approach to African philosophy in academic intellectual discourse.

4.6. The historical basis of philosophic sagacity

The question of African philosophy has now gone through many meaningful historical stages. The first stage was one in which the African was considered as one who was incapable of rigorous and dialectical inquiry. It was a stage where the black man's culture and even mind was claimed to be extremely strange to reason, logic, and various habits of scientific scrutiny. This racist orientation led Europeans to refer to Africa as the 'dark continent', one with 'primitive' knowledge systems, 'savage or inferior mentality', and inhabited by the 'Other'. Hegel's radical polarization of Africa/Europe prepared for a philosophical base which was exploited by anthropologists such as Lucien Lévy-Brühl to belittle non-white races.

Nevertheless, some Western anthropologists later abandoned the idea of Western culture as a universal norm. The recognition of cultural relativism and the rejection of Western culture as a universal norm have been the hallmark of anthropology worldwide since the 1930s. From this point on, cultural relativism surfaced. The works of Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen should be mentioned here. In summary, both authors confirmed the

existence of thought systems in Africa. This had a profound influence on Tempels' axial work, *Bantu Philosophy*. Tempels called for the need to recognize the rationality of so-called primitive man. This call marked an incisive refutation of the ideas of Lévy-Brühl on 'primitive mentality'. Tempels' orientation, as we have seen, was criticized as ethnophilosophy. The professional approach, as seen in Towa and Hountondji, which criticizes ethnophilosophy, has also been criticized for not being African but European or Western. This ushers in Oruka's new orientation, philosophic sagacity, which stands out to prove the contrary. Let us examine Oruka's project of philosophic sagacity in the next section.

4.7. Oruka's project of philosophic sagacity

According to Oruka, the philosophic sagacity project aims to show that the problem in traditional Africa is not the lack of logic, reason, or scientific curiosity. This explains why in 1974 he formulated a research programme at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, entitled 'Thoughts of Traditional Kenyan Sages'. Oruka outlined the research programme in the following words:

> The real purpose in this project was to help substantiate or invalidate the claim that traditional African peoples were innocent of logical and critical thinking. Was traditional Africa a place where no persons had the room or mind to think independently and at times even critically of the communal consensus? If this claim were true, then it must follow that it is not possible to discover individuals in traditional Africa who can practise critical thinking. And whoever is considered a thinker or a wise man must simply be, at best, a good narrator of traditionally imposed wisdom and myths. Would it be possible to identify persons of traditional African culture, capable of the critical, second-order type of thinking about the various problems of human life and nature; persons, that is, who subject beliefs that are traditionally taken for granted to independent rational re-examination and who are inclined to accept or reject such beliefs on the authority of reason rather than on the basis of a communal or religious consensus? (Oruka 1991:17)

Four years later, between 24 and 29 July 1978, during the commemoration of Dr William Amo Conference in Accra (Ghana), Oruka introduced the idea of philosophic

sagacity into the debate on African philosophy. He set out to reject three negative claims regarding the philosophical status of indigenous African thought: first, the claims of ethnophilosophy that Africa is a place of philosophical unanimity; second, that writing is a precondition for philosophy; and third, the Eurocentric claim that Greek sages are philosophical while African sages are not (ibid. 1). These three claims will be examined in the subsequent sections.

4.8. Ethnophilosophy, unanimity, and African critical thought

According to Oruka, ethnophilosophy is based on the assumption that traditional Africa is a place of philosophical unanimity. This implies that traditional Africa encouraged unanimity regarding beliefs and values and discouraged individual, critical thought. If this were true, it would allow no room for individual thinkers of the likes of, say, Socrates or Descartes, with their own views on such matters. Philosophic sagacity objects to this claim of 'imaginary unanimity' in Africa, a claim which Oruka regarded as absurd, by presenting empirical evidence of the 'internal pluralism' among indigenous African thinkers (Hountondji 1983). While rulers everywhere will always crave unanimity, thinkers thrive in dialogue and diversity of opinion. The fact that Africans disagree in search of solutions is a healthy indicator which militates against the 'myth of unanimity' projected by ethnophilosophy.

Ethnophilosophy, according to Oruka, also endorsed an indigenous African thought steeped in anonymity and myths.[101] His choice of individual thinkers invalidates the claim to anonymity. The individual thinkers in a given cultural orientation reflect upon and critically assess conventional beliefs. This explains why he categorizes Griaule's Ogotemmêli as a folk and not a philosophic sage.[102] According to Oruka, all that Ogotemmêli does is to summarize Dogon beliefs (no matter how esoteric) on a variety of topics, and there is minimal evidence of critical and independent reflection on the beliefs by Ogotemmêli himself.

The element of individuality is crucial to Oruka's conception of philosophic sagacity:

> Philosophy is a perspective of the whole or part of the human predicament and insightful suggestion on how to get out or conform.... This sort of perspective can be found in anybody (white, black, yellow, female or male). But in every community,

[101] Oruka's repudiation of myths is discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

[102] We will come back to Oruka's categorization of sages shortly.

there are always persons who specialize in offering or studying such perspectives.(Oruka 1990b: 35-36) [In traditional Africa this role was left to the sages.]

4.9. Oral tradition and literacy in philosophic sagacity

Oruka's second subject of disagreement is the colonial bias against unwritten or oral thought. By publishing his interviews with the sages, he aimed to counter the claim:

> The second philosophical claim is that philosophy is and can only be a 'written' enterprise; a tradition without writing is incapable of philosophy. Therefore, any claim that there is philosophy (even when termed *sagacity*) in illiterate Africa is a non-scientific, mythological claim. This claim too is false. (Oruka 1991:1)

He posits that there are illiterate African thinkers whose memories are, in terms of consistency and organization, as good as information recorded in well-composed books and better than poorly written books (ibid.53-54). Hence, to argue, like Bodunrin, that Africans have a late start in philosophy just because they are no written records and no one has 'kept a diary' (Hountondji 1983) of Africa's past philosophical activities is, wrongly, to limit the sources from which we can detect traces of such activities(Oruka 1991:54). Furthermore, Oruka counters the views of his critics on the possibility of philosophic sagacity in the context of a lack of written philosophical treatises:

> To exist as a philosopher, it is not necessary that one's thoughts must progress or be available to the future generation. Sufficient for the existence of a philosopher is that one's contemporaries recognize one's philosophical abilities and practice […] lack of knowledge about one's or a people's philosophy is not a proof of the non-existence of such a philosophy. (ibid.53)

Hence, while systematicity is important to the structure and consistency of good thinking, neither it nor preservation of thought necessarily requires literacy. Literacy is not in itself a measure of the philosophical quality of someone's thoughts. He also reminds us that Socrates' philosophy did not exist just because Plato and others gave expression to it through their pens. Plato and others wrote it down (even if they distorted much of it) because it

existed in the first place (Oruka 1991:6). Therefore, there is no mutual exclusivity between the unwritten and the written because what is written can be reported orally, and what is oral can be expressed in writing (ibid.6).

4.10. The African sage tradition and Eurocentric bias

Oruka's third cause of disagreement is based on the Eurocentric bias created by colonialism that Greek sages used reason while Africans do not philosophize. This hegemonic frame of reference explains why the sayings of numerous Pre-Socratic Greek sages such as Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, Empedocles, and other Pre-Socratics were paraded as 'philosophical' and 'unprecedented philosophical innovators of genius' (van Binsbergen 2012b:11), whereas those of traditional African sages were not. Western philosophy and natural science are commonly held to have begun in ancient Greece, with the Pre-Socratic philosophers each seeking to identify the nature of primal matter: Thales (Water), Anaximenes (Air), Heraclitus (Fire), Xenophanes (Earth), and Empedocles (Water, Air, Earth, Fire)—all flourishing in the middle of the first millennium BCE.

This unjustified belief that the sayings of the Greek sages are 'philosophical', while those of traditional African sages are anything but philosophical (Oruka 1991:1), had further led to the image of philosophy as the restricted property of Greeks or Europeans and, even more exclusively, the property of white males. Oruka maintains that the apparently simple sayings of the Pre-Socratics, given the status of philosophy, were equivalent to the subsequent sustained commentaries by later philosophers. This explains why he does not see any difference between the ideas expressed by indigenous African sages and those of the earlier Greeks. When recorded in books, the sayings of the Greek sages came to be widely regarded as 'philosophical', and the people who made the utterances 'philosophers' (ibid.1-2). This triggers Oruka to wonder why the sayings of Kenyan sages like Mbuya Akoko, Oruka Ranginya, and Osuru should not be similarly regarded after they are committed to writing by professional philosophers. He maintained, in an interview with Kai Kresse (1993), that rationality or reason is always a part of any culture, no matter whether the people are Chinese or African or from anywhere else.

Oruka justifies his comparison of the indigenous African sages with the Pre-Socratics by citing two methods that have contributed to the growth of philosophy in the West, beginning with its Greek roots. One direct method, that of using dialogues, is exemplified in the early Platonic works. Socrates asks primary questions, upon which the exposition of the

ideas of his interlocutor is based. Oruka views his own dialogues with the sages as an example of this practice in the African context. Socrates regarded himself as a 'midwife' of sorts, because he merely helped those with knowledge to bring it out. He brought out what was in each case really the property of his interlocutors, not his own. Socrates maintained that the sages he and his disciples interviewed were the owners of their own ideas. The professional philosopher, he says, 'plays the role of philosophical provocation' (Oruka 1991:36). The other method, exemplified in the later Platonic works, involves direct engagement with the sayings of the sages through a commentary on their ideas. These can be derived from general acquaintance with the sages' views.

This section has presented the three negative claims regarding the philosophical status of African philosophy, which Oruka sought to obviate. In the next section, I present the basic themes of sage philosophy in Africa.

4.11. Areas and persons of research

A sage, according to *Chambers English Dictionary*, is 'a man of great wisdom'. Oruka adds that a person is a sage in the philosophic sense only to the extent that he consistently articulates the basic ethical and empirical issues that are relevant to a society and demonstrates his ability to offer insightful solutions to some of those issues (Oruka 1991:3). This implies that in a given community, a sage must be capable of using wisdom to understand and make mature and objective judgements concerning the basic truths, values, and logic that guide the beliefs and practices of the people in that community. These definitions and attributes contradict the general description, even in learned circles, of a sage as a wise person in an illiterate or technologically underdeveloped community whose residents depend much on the oracular sayings of seers to keep up with the mysteries and surprises of life. This incorrect description may confuse a sage with a prophet and vice versa, but the two are not identical. The fact that a prophet has an ability to predict the future for a community does not make him sage. The sage's ability consistently causes him to be preoccupied with the basic moral and empirical issues and questions in his society. His flair for offering wise solutions to these problems makes him different from the prophet.

Sages can be found in all societies, even though some societies may feel a greater need for sages than others may do. A society, for instance, in which most people value libraries, books, and museums as the real sources of knowledge will feel it has less need for a living sage. Sages, however, exist in all classes and cultures. Oruka maintains that all

communities use their sages or at least their ideas to defend themselves and maintain their individual and collective survival. It does not matter that such sages bear the names 'philosophers', 'statesmen', or 'warriors'. A sage may be a Ghandi or a Nyerere (Oruka 1991:3).

When it comes to who qualifies as a sage, the best judge must be the community from which the person hails. Some may be popular in the community, while others may be unknown. This is because wise men do not often go about selling their wisdom. Therefore, the researcher ought to follow the guidance of a community in order to validate the alleged sages and dismiss others. This is because the community may be misled to treat some persons as sages. This is possible because as sage Stephen M. Kithanje says:

> There are three kinds of wise ones:
> a) those wise in the service of their stomachs only
> b) those wise for having learnt from the wisdom of the wise, and
> c) those wise because they were born wise. (Oruka 1990: 63)

We have defined who a sage is, his role in the community, and what distinguishes him from a prophet. Now, what is the relation between a sage and a philosopher?

The word 'philosophy' is derived from the Greek words *philos* ('love' or 'pursuit') and *sophia* ('wisdom'). In this original sense, then, philosophy means 'the love or pursuit of wisdom', and a philosopher is someone who loves or pursues wisdom. According to Oruka, the thoughts of a given and named individual sage can be expressed and defended as philosophical counselling on various issues of nature and human life. The sage has at least two abilities: insight and ethical inspiration. He/she can employ these abilities for the betterment of their community. They can contribute basic moral and metaphysical advice. Their thoughts equally can form significant raw information for technical philosophical reflection by professionals. However, a philosopher may not have the ethical commitment and enthusiasm that we may find in the sage.

What is common in real sages is the love of truth and wisdom. A sage may smother truthfulness only because of the prescriptions of wisdom and not because of any material benefits. This explains why Oruka thinks the definition Pythagoras gave of the philosopher as a 'lover of wisdom' ought to be set aside for the sage. Socrates, Oruka would argue, was wrongly labelled 'philosopher', for he was first of all a sage; he used philosophy to advance his wisdom and expose the hypocrisies of his time. For Oruka, Socrates qualifies as a sage-

philosopher, as sage philosophers are to be valued over 'mere' technical philosophers, who have divorced philosophical speculation from the immediate questions of life. In Oruka's view, it is important not only to have wisdom, but also to possess and practise it. A philosopher is one who has intellectual concern for wisdom, and who has this concern not just occasionally but as an integral part of life.[103]

4.12. Methodology

The method used in researching sage philosophy may be called philosophical anthropology. It entails identifying and dialoguing with traditional individuals. 'Traditional' here means areas wherein life is dominated by beliefs and practices not guided by written literature and advanced technology. The objective of such research is not to reach a communal consensus on a question or problem under discussion, but to find persons known to be among the wise ones in the community and carry on dialogue with them on various issues that are relevant to the life and culture of their community. These discussions or interviews are conducted in the native language of the supposed wise men or women in a given community. Such selected persons are capable of giving detailed explanations concerning the beliefs and practices of their community. They are also, at times, capable of offering reasonable criticism of some of these beliefs and practices. They go beyond the mere systematization of communal wisdom and provide relevant explanations and background to popular wisdom. Therefore, one major task of the professional philosopher becomes to identify the sages in a culture and then record their potentially unique insights on certain themes of fundamental importance to human life: the existence of God, the nature of death, the nature of time, the nature of freedom, the nature of education, and so on. The insights of some of the sages can be termed unique because they may very well differ from conventional beliefs in their societies. Oruka assumed that by using this technique he would be able to distinguish between true philosophy and popular wisdom. He credits his philosophic sages with such unique insights as opposed to folk sages. This explains why he does not regard Griaule's Ogotemmêli as a philosophic sage. For Oruka, there is minimal evidence of critical and independent reflection on beliefs by Ogotemmêli himself. Hallen and Sodipo's *onisegun* (masters of medicine, herbalists, and native doctors) do not qualify as philosophic sages either, because their ideas are representative of the thoughts of the ordinary Yoruba (Oruka 1991:49-50).

[103] See Oruka, Mugambi & Ojwang (1989: 2).

4.13. Wisdom and non-wisdom

The first step in research into sage philosophy is based on the assumption that there are, in almost every society, certain statements that are wise sayings, while others are commonplace assertions. Further, it is assumed that wise statements are originally propositions made by men and women considered wise. Later, such propositions may become the sayings of almost every average person in the community; they become popular wisdom. Yet many of those who utter them hardly stop to discover from whom the sayings arose.

The second step in research is to be able to distinguish three types of statements: (i) wise statements, (ii) commonplace statements, and (iii) foolish statements. The distinction between the three is often not as sharp as one might wish it to be. However, generally, a distinction should be made: wisdom is expressed by the first category of statements, while the second and third categories constitute the vast area of non-wisdom.

Oruka's attempt to make a clear-cut demarcation between wisdom and non-wisdom results in a rigid conception of wisdom. It gives the impression that wisdom is static. As we saw in Chapter 2, Derrida and Deleuze challenge us to think beyond binary oppositions and appreciate the unicity in plurality. Oruka needs to broaden his conception of wisdom. This is because he limits wisdom to statements and leaves out the art of living. He does not take into consideration the wider relationship between wisdom and philosophy we expressed earlier in this chapter.

4.14. Cultural contexts

Wisdom does not exist in a vacuum but in a context. A statement may be considered wise in one context and yet appear foolish in a different context. It depends on the beliefs and dominant activities of the culture under consideration. For example, a people who do not eat fish and never engage in fishing may not really appreciate wisdom that explains the art of fishing. Nor can a people who have never owned cattle see much wisdom in the utterances of the science of cattle rearing. Yet, there must be some sayings which are able to transcend their given cultural spheres and appeal as wisdom in all cultures. Let us consider the following three statements:

1. As things come to be and cease to be, so our problems will come to an end.

2. Every human being needs food.
3. I do not care what happens when I die, so I will make sure I spend all I have before I die.

It should be clear that the first is a wise statement, the second a commonplace and the third a foolish statement (Oruka 1991:35).

A person who makes a wise statement can be challenged to justify it. He can also be requested to apply it in practice. If the person has a philosophic frame of mind, he will no doubt be able to offer some rational answer to the challenge. If he lacks this gift, he is likely to offer an unimpressive answer or even refuse to give an answer.

In a sense, Oruka remoulds and rechristens Wiredu's 'folk philosophy' (Wiredu 1980) as 'culture philosophy', which he claims includes the shared, basic, conventional beliefs of a society or culture on a variety of important human concerns, topics, and questions of philosophical interest. Nevertheless, for this 'culture philosophy' to then metamorphose into 'philosophic sagacity', individual thinkers (sages) in that society must also reflect upon and critically assess such conventional beliefs on the basis of their own experience and intellectual prowess, and on this basis possibly suggest either criticisms or novel alternatives. This shows the element of individuality that Oruka insists is a *sine qua non* of philosophy in any culture (Hallen 2009:72).

The view that wisdom exists in a specific context largely depends on the North Atlantic anthropological conception of culture. This conception sees culture as bounded and holistic, with different societies living in separate worlds. It is the very basis of cultural and epistemological relativism.

4.15. Provocation

If the person is able to justify his statements and attempt to apply them, he can further be provoked by an offer of an alternative argument to his position. The alternative, he may feel, has completely contradicted his way of seeing things. Then, he may admit having been mistaken. On the other hand, the sage in question may respond by a counter-proposal, which indeed seriously challenges the alternative suggested, and this counter-proposal may still be consistent with his earlier view. The interview or discussion can go on endlessly through these twists and turns, forming a process which can be referred to as *sagacious didactics*

(Oruka 1991:36). This may be the case, as Oruka focuses on dialogue with individuals on abstract topics in search of wisdom. Our study goes beyond just that and shows that wisdom should be practical knowledge that allows one to solve daily problems in one's life.

4.16. The role of the interviewer

The role of the interviewer is to act as the provocateur of the sage. The interviewer is to give birth to the sage's full views on the subject under consideration. Oruka proposes that during the discussion the interviewer should use a tape recorder to record everything discussed (ibid.36). Some sages, however, may be annoyed by persistent provocation. Others, nevertheless, will enjoy it and wish to carry on. One of the folk sages in Oruka's study (Muganda Okwako), for example, was asked what he thought about the concept of death. He reacted very negatively:

> Go and ask your dead grandfathers! They are very many. Why do you ask me about death? Do you wish to cause my death? Now, I will not answer any of your evil tricks. (ibid.)

This sparked a disagreement, and both the interviewer and sage parted on this note. The same question was asked to a philosophic sage (Oruka Ranginya), who boldly argued as follows:

> Death is as good as life. If we imagine that there is God, and that we are his plants, then through death God uproots some plants to enable the rest to have enough food and to grow healthily. If there were no death, there would never be enough food and space for everybody. Indeed, God is very kind; he kills only a few and allows the majority to keep on. You, Odera (the interviewer), if you were God, you probably would even be more cruel! Unlike God, you would kill too many people. (ibid.)

Such a cheerful opinion about death is contrasted with the negative approach earlier expressed. This helps in distinguishing the philosophic sage from the folk sage.

4.17. Distinguishing the philosophic sage from the folk sage

An important aspect of Oruka's technique is to distinguish the philosophic sages from the folk sages. This detachment is crucial in his conception of philosophic sagacity:

> The folk sage is versed in the common-place culture, customs and beliefs of his people. He can recite or describe them with much competence. However, he is neither able to raise any critical question about them, nor is he able to observe the inherent contradictions. The philosophic sage, like the folk sage, may equally be versed in the beliefs and values of his society. His main task is to make a critical assessment of them and recommend as far as the communal pressure allows, only those beliefs and values that pass his rational scrutiny. The folk sage is identifiable by his consistent inability to isolate his own opinions from the beliefs of the community and his ready inclination to take refuge behind the popular unexamined wisdom wherever he is intellectually challenged. The philosophic sage, on the other hand, is clearly able to isolate the given beliefs of the community from his own evaluation, rationalization and even criticism of those beliefs. He is also able to enjoy a dialectical or intellectual game with the interviewer. (ibid.)

4.18. Oral practice and the practice of modern education

Oruka's research was carried out among people who had to depend on oral tradition. This does not mean that sages are possible only in a non-literate tradition; illiteracy is not a necessary condition for sagacity. It is possible to find sages in both literate and pre-literate societies. If this were not the case, then it would follow that very soon Africa would run out of her sages. This is because the old are dying, and governments are doing much to combat illiteracy. The point is that there are sages even with the modern form of education. It is on these grounds that Oruka endorses Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Mahatma Ghandi of India as sages.

4.19. Subject matter: Extracts and commentaries on selected Kenyan sages

In the following sections, we will present and comment on some of the extracts from selected Kenyan sages. Oruka presents a brief biography and photograph of each of the sages and their responses on certain topics, in a bid to appreciate the philosophic depth of each sage. He

insists on giving details of the sages as individuals, publishing their original oral philosophical thoughts.

4.20. Paul Mbuya Akoko

Paul Mbuya Akoko was born around 1891 in Karachuoyo, South Nyanza, Kenya. He served as paramount chief and also as a member of the East African Legislative Assembly. He believed in both Christianity and Luo traditional religion. He postulates God as Supreme Being:

> Godin my language is *Nyasaye*. But God is one for all communities and races. The Luos thought differently. They thought their god was not god over other ethnicities. They were wrong. God is one Supreme Being for all peoples. This I can show by reference to the fact of the uniformity of nature. If there were many gods with similar powers, nature would be in chaos, since there would be conflicts and wars between the gods. But nature is uniform not chaotic: adog, for example, brings forth a dog not a cat. And a cat produces a cat not a dog or a hen. All this is a proof of one Supreme Mind ruling nature. But what exactly is God? This nobody knows or can know. (Oruka 1991: 37)

Paul Mbuya Akoko postulates that nature is uniform and, consequently, he uses the principle to prove the existence of one Supreme God. He cites uniformity in nature and the peace and tranquillity which hold the universe together. This position calls for a serious philosophical consideration, given that Aristotle, and later St Thomas Aquinas, used the same principle in formulating the cosmological argument used in Western philosophy to prove the existence of One Supreme Being. The sage reasons that if there were many opposing gods ruling the universe, there would almost necessarily be rivalry and jealousy among the gods, with subsequent chaos and destruction. Mbeya's account reveals the philosophic ability of this sage. Here is a sage involved in deliberate thinking. He goes against the general Luo belief in the concept of God and offers his personal opinion with a balanced argument.

On a question relating to man and woman, Mbuya states:

> There is a popular Luo belief that the man is owner and master of the homestead, the whole homestead, but I think this belief is wrong. For, when we come to the house,

> the woman is in control there. In the house, the man can only ask for things. He cannot do as he pleases without any restraints. However, the woman too cannot do anything without asking her husband. Thus, husband and wife help each other. Where peace is desired, each person tries not to overstep the boundary which common sense determines in relationships. (ibid. 139-140)

Oruka notes that philosophic sages are capable of conceiving and rationally recommending ideas, which offer alternatives to the commonly accepted opinions and practices (ibid. 57). They transcend the communal wisdom and use ratiocinative second-order reasoning. The individual insight and ability to go beyond communal wisdom become the personal philosophy of the sage.

The philosophic sage reflects on and re-evaluates a culture's philosophy. This is because every culture has basic and justifiable ideas and beliefs. Generally, in every free or well-informed society, every reasonable person is conversant with the culture. The sage has a mastery of the culture philosophy of his people. However, few sages possess the philosophic inclination to make critical assessments of the culture and the basic beliefs and ideas that underlie it. This is precisely what philosophic sages do: they use reason rather than popular beliefs to explain things. In so doing, they produce a system within a system, an order within an order (ibid. 49).

The first system is that of culture philosophy. This system harbours unquestionable ideas and truth claims. There is a firm grip on these assertions, such that any opposition faces a stiff resistance from folk sages. Their descriptions or judgements do not transcend the premises and conclusions provided by the prevailing culture. As opposed to the first system, the philosophic sage produces the second order. This is what philosophic sagacity is all about. It is a critical defiance of conventionalism and archaism as maintained by the first order. Oruka presents the sharp contrast:

> In contrast, the second order is that of philosophic sagacity. It is a critical reflection on the first order. In many other cases, it is a critical rebellion against the first order conformity and anachronism. While the first order glorifies the communal conformity, philosophic sagacity is skeptical of communal consensus, and it employs reason to assess it. While the first order is purely absolutist and ideological, the second order is generally open-minded and rationalistic. Its truths are given as tentative and ratiocinative, not as God-sent messages. (ibid.49)

Mbuya goes further to explain the question of equality of the sexes in political and social terms; he posits that if it is not properly handled, unnecessary problems may crop up. He argues that equality can only be sought after several years of education and orientation. If this is too hastily done, there could be chaos. He argues:

> Education will in time help to redress this imbalance since men and women are inherently equal. We see that woman can be more intelligent than man just as man can also be more intelligent than woman. (ibid. 140)

He castigates traditions in which women are portrayed as inferior to men. This makes women feel they are so, which Mbuya labels laziness. Mbuya's view on the question relating to man and woman is convincing and original. He goes against normal Luo beliefs and proposes a thesis of 'balance of forces'. He argues with cogency that the conspicuous differences in man and woman are only apparent, since, in reality, man and woman have their particular attributes equated by nature. Thus, man has the irrefutable ability to do certain things better than a woman or do heavier kinds of work, on the other hand, while a woman is bequeathed with the matchless capacity to carry, bear, and suckle a child. It is for this reason that man is neither superior to nor master of woman. Mbuya sees no inequality between the genders and so offers proof to discount the thesis. He criticizes those traditions that say that women are inferior to men. His thesis invalidates male chauvinism and is an outright call for female emancipation.

On the concept of time, Mbuya postulates that the Luos could speak of things that happened in the past by use of specific events that happened. The past, in the Luo language, is *chon*, the present *tinde,* and *gi ma nobi* is the future. He specifies that the future can be definite, as when people may have some idea when they expect an event to take place.

Mbuya's exposition of the Luo concept of time shows the relationship between time and history. It is this compatibility which affects the way the concept of time is used. The time described is approximate, because in a traditional environment time is conceived in psychological terms. This is opposed to modern, science-oriented societies, where time is mechanical and people use clocks and watches. The sage, however, explains that for the Luo the concept of time is linear, for people to make reference to the past, present, and future.

Mbuya's view on time is very valuable and revealing, particularly because it invalidates John Mbiti's (Mbiti 1970:23-23) assertion that Africans lack the concept of future time.[104]

4.21. Mzee Oruka Ranginya

Mzee Oruka Ranginya was born in Ugenya in Siaya District in Kenya. He had no formal education but taught himself to read and write. He was a local wrestler and an acknowledged sage. He was adviser to the chiefs and the community. He married ten wives and raised 36 children. He died in 1979 at the age of 79 years.

On the question of God, Ranginya asserts that God is an idea. He explains that God, however, had no likeness to man. God is like wind (*yamo makudho*) and He can be anywhere. But God is also the same thing as moral goodness (*chung kata tim maber, maber*). God is not a concrete object; it has no substance. God is the idea of Goodness or power that man wishes or seeks to attain. It is wrong to personify God—God is the concept of open-heartedness (*chuny mathuolo*). God is the idea which represents Goodness itself. Without this idea, evil would be permitted and practised everywhere. But God is not a body (Oruka 1991: 119).

Ranginya cites two contradictions which posit that God exists in idea and in substantial form. This for him is fictitious. He sees God as an idea, an ideal in the absolute sense. God is an idea that represents Goodness in an abstract sense. Furthermore, since God is thought to be both in Heaven and on Earth simultaneously, he cannot be a material object and therefore cannot logically have the image of man.

On the question of death, Ranginya does not necessarily perceive of the phenomenon of death as something bad.[105] He expresses the view that death has its utility. He sees death as nature's way of easing congestion on Earth. He explains that each person's existence on Earth ends at death. God does this in good faith, as He is the sole giver and taker of life. Ranginya's position dwells upon leading a moral life on Earth. His cheerful notion of death is opposed to that of some folk sages. Muganda Okwako, like other folk sages, is enmeshed in the popular notion of death. His notion of death is one of negativity and anger/irritation at

[104] Mbiti (1970:21) considers that what is now happening or certain to occur immediately belongs to the category of 'No-time', such that 'time is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with long past, a present, and virtually no future'. However, Mbiti's conception of time has been criticized by several scholars. See, for example, Gyekye (1975); Kagame (1976); Makinde (1988); Gbadegesin (1991); Munda Carew (1993); Masolo (1994); and Oke (2004).

[105] Muganda Okwako's and Oruka Ranginya's opposing perceptions of death are cited in 4.16.

being asked about death. He thought that being asked about death and answering could lead to one's own death, and that being asked is a matter of evil trickery (ibid.36). Another folk sage, Chege Kamau, says death is the end of life. He asserts that death is the enemy of all things and everybody hates it (ibid.91).For Ali Mwatani, life ends at death, which is 'very bad' and evil (ibid.94).

4.22. Njeru wa Kanyenje

Njeru wa Kanyenje was born in about 1880 and died in 1976. He hailed from Emba District, Kenya. He was an experienced blacksmith who was greatly respected as a man of strong principles. He was conscripted and fought during the First World War. He hated the Europeans for making Africans fight a European 'tribal war' between the British and the Germans. He had no formal schooling and had one wife, three daughters, and one son. In the 1970s some of his grandchildren persuaded him to become a Christian. To please them, he said, he was baptized as a Christian on condition that it was done at his home and that he would not be required to accept any Christian name. He considered religion to be witchcraft:

> I do not care much about God or religion. Right from the beginning (i.e. when the *muzungu* [whiteman] first brought organized religion), I saw religion as a *bluff*. It is a whiteman's witchcraft! But this witchcraft has today triumphed over the traditional African witchcraft. Today, I recognize its *victory* but not its *truth*. It is still a bluff. I do not pray to God nor do I consult witchdoctors. Both religion and witchcraft are bluffs. They have no truths in them. My great wish is that I should be spared the interference from religions and witchcrafts. (ibid. 38)

Njeru wa Kanyeje's view that religion is a form of witchcraft and that all witchcraft is bluff ties in with the Marxist maxim of religion as the opium of the people.

The sayings of the sages listed above, apart from there being value in them, can provoke vigorous philosophical discussions. They are presented as individuals with opinions that go beyond what obtains in their local communities. One defining characteristic of Oruka's sage philosophers is that they may be inspired by their culture, yet they go beyond that culture. In this way they may make wise statements that could be applicable in all contexts. In that respect they are one hundred percent comparable with Descartes, Hegel, Kant, and even the Pre-Socratics. Yet, we must also realize the peripheral situation of these

sages, which constitutes the essential difference from Western philosophers. Kant, for example, was trained as a philosopher in a scholarly tradition with the dominance of the text, the presence of the state and the market as a distant context, and the presence of an academic philosophical tradition in which such an academic philosopher could articulate himself in both continuity and originality. For the Pre-Socratics, there was ultimately the distant presence, in Mesopotamia and Egypt, of far more specialized, literate centres of learning established for millennia. Hence, it would make sense for African sages to be conceived of as predicated on the distant presence of the great traditions of Christian, European, Indian, and Chinese thought, and so on, and not just in their own context. From the comments of the various sages we realize that Western culture and philosophy are evident in the appraisal each sage makes.

4.23. Conclusion

In this chapter, our main concern has been to present sage philosophy and show the relevance of wisdom in philosophy. Oruka brings out a viable methodology in searching for traditional wisdom by using oral interviews based on dialogue on abstract topics with individual sages. The extracts from the Kenyan sages he interviewed showed their degree of competence on the specific questions he posed. Oruka succeeds in showing an African system of thought, which he considers indigenous and philosophical. These sages do not just recite the common beliefs of their people but go beyond them in critical analyses. The implication is that criticism and analyses are not an exclusive preserve of the North Atlantic mind. The African sages' mode of sagacity situates them in the continental history of African philosophy.

5

RE-THINKING ORUKA'S PHILOSOPHIC SAGACITY IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

5.1. Introduction

This chapter deals with a number of objections that have been brought against Oruka's philosophic sagacity. These criticisms come from philosophers who primarily bring forth definitional and methodological problems. Oruka's project is surviving and flourishing after his premature death, but his conception of wisdom needs to better fit the present globalized intercultural world. His sage philosophy is centred on indigenous thinkers and the *modern* debate on African philosophy. I will critically examine Oruka's vision of sagacity from a different philosophic position and aesthetic style; namely, *post-modernism*. This will enables us to see if Oruka's modernist position is still valid in our search for African traditional wisdom in contemporary times. I will first attempt a definition of post-modernism and delineate some of its key characteristics and positions.

5.2. What is post-modernism?

Post-modernism is predominantly of French and German descent and arose notably in the 1970s. It haunts social science today and is often described as one of the most intellectual movements to appear in the last 40 years.[106] Modernity entered history as a progressive force promising to liberate humankind from ignorance and irrationality,[107] but one can readily

[106] For clear descriptions of post-modernism, see Harvey (1990); Rosenau (1992); Bauman (1993); Powell & Owen (2007).

[107]For more on modernity see Giddens (1990); Heller (1990); and Toulmin (1990).African academic philosophy, having started in the 1950s with the works of Kagame and Diop, saw much debate on its ontological status and appropriate method. For moreon this debate see, for example, Oruka (1975, 1983, 1987); Wiredu (1980); Bodunrin (1981); Hountondji (1983); Mudimbe (1988, 1994, 1997); and Gyekye (1995). A considerable number of professional African philosophers have endorsed the modernist methodological approach, arguing that African philosophy should be a model of understanding what is rational, critical, and common in every culture. This view is defended by Oruka (1975); Wiredu (1980, 1990, 1996, 1998); Bodunrin (1981, 1985); Hountondji (1983); and Gyekye (1995). Others have subscribed to the post-modern orientation, arguing for a philosophy

wonder whether that promise has been fulfilled.[108] Most of what applies here to post-modernism also applies to post-structuralism. Although the two are not identical, they overlap considerably and are sometimes considered synonymous. Few efforts have been made to distinguish between the two, probably because the differences are of little consequence. While some scholars argue for the fundamental non-identity of the two, others see them as similar. Rosenau (1992), for example, sees the major difference as one more of emphasis than of substance. Post-modernists are more oriented towards cultural critique, while post-structuralists emphasize method and epistemological matters. While post-structuralists concentrate on deconstruction, language, discourse, meaning, and symbols, post-modernists cast a broader net. The post-structuralists remain uncompromisingly anti-empirical, whereas the post-modernists focus on the concrete in the form of *le quotidien*, daily life, as an alternative to theory. Those post-modernists who hark back to the pre-modern are classical empiricists, privileging sense experience, and a highly personal, individual, non-generalized, and emotional form of knowledge.

Post-modernism opposes perspectives that make absolute and timeless claims. It reminds us that knowledge is always provisional and incomplete. It undermines foundationalism, realism, objectivity, and impartiality, and it promotes difference, multiplicity, and fragmentation. According to post-modernism, knowledge production has to call into question the grand narratives and rather seek to elevate cultural difference, the local, and the particular. This is because grand narratives will always foster authoritarianism and omit differences. The main proponents of post-modernism include Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard, who were largely inspired by German philosophers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger.

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that is African in content—i.e. relevant to tradition, history, culture, and contemporary struggles; see, for example, Senghor (1964) and Sogolo (1993). Subsequently, cosmopolitan philosophers from Africa have successfully broken through the continental boundaries of African philosophy's orientations in their critiques of North Atlantic knowledge production on Africa. See, for example, Mudimbe (1988, 1994, 1997); Appiah (1992); and Mudimbe & Appiah (1993).

[108] Some maintain that the modern age ranged from the 15th to the 19th centuries and that post-modernism has been evolving for the last 150 years. Others contend that post-modernity originated in the late 1960s and the early 1970s (Ferry & Renaut 1985, 1987). Scholars also disagree about whether the modern and post-modern overlap or are distinct, whether post-modernism signals a genuine break with modernity or is merely its logical continuation (Hassan 1987).

5.3. Sceptical and affirmative post-modernism

There are probably as many forms of post-modernism as there are post-modernists. Within this diversity, there are two broad orientations: sceptical and affirmative post-modernists (ibid.14-17).

Sceptical post-modernists (or merely sceptics) offer a pessimistic, negative, gloomy assessment of the post-modern age. They argue that the post-modern age is one of fragmentation, disintegration, malaise, meaninglessness, vagueness or even an absence of moral parameters, and societal chaos (Baudrillard 1983; Scherpe 1986-87:101). They posit the immediacy of death, the demise of the subject, the end of the author, the impossibility of truth, and the abrogation of the order of representation. Even where there is room for happiness, farce, parody, pleasure, and 'joyous affirmation' (Derrida 1978: 292), these are only temporary, empty, meaningless forms of gaiety that merely mark a period of waiting for catastrophe (Scherpe 1986-87). For the sceptics, there is no truth, for all that is left is play, the play of words and meaning.

Affirmative post-modernists agree with the sceptics' critique of modernity, but they have a more hopeful, optimistic view of the post-modern age. Most of them seek a philosophical and ontological practice that is nondogmatic, tentative, and nonideological. Many of them would argue that certain value choices are superior to others, a line of reasoning that would be disapproved of by sceptical post-modernists (Bordewich 1988; Frank 1988).

The dichotomy sketched above of the sceptical and affirmative post-modernists should not be seen as completely authentic or adequate. This should be no surprise because post-modernism itself is not static and unchanging; rather, it is endlessly dynamic and always in transition.

5.4. Some common features of post-modernism

Even though we have noted that post-modernism is made up of different strains of thought, there are some general common features.

In its most extreme formulations, post-modernism is revolutionary. It goes to the very core of what constitutes social science and is radically critical of it. In its more moderate proclamations, post-modernism encourages substantive redefinition and innovation. It proposes to set itself outside the modern paradigm, not to judge modernity by its own criteria but rather to contemplate and deconstruct it. Hence, it is about loosening modernity's grip on

the old authorities and opening up to a new diversity. It is sceptical towards modernism and is a way of going beyond or moving ahead of modernism. The worldviews and perspectives of the Enlightenment period, such as the subject, reason, representation, and reality, are critically re-thought. Post-modernists argue that modernity is no longer a force for liberation but rather a source of subjugation, oppression, and repression. In the domain of philosophy, post-modernism has a renewed respect for the subjective and an increased suspicion of reason and objectivity.

Recurrent themes in post-modernism include anti-foundationalism, difference, anti-realism, and the subjectivity of all knowledge and values. This means that philosophical theory and knowledge cannot be built on firm and immovable foundations. In other words, there are no metaphysically and epistemologically unproblematic conceptual building blocks. Knowledge production is always relative, temporary, and replaceable. Post-modernism's distrust of foundationalism is evident in Leotard's definition of post-modernism as 'incredulity towards meta-narratives' that claim to be scientific and objective.

Having offered a general introduction to post-modernism, to its intellectual precursors, and to the distinction between sceptical and affirmative post-modernists, we now proceed to use post-modern arguments in the objections to Oruka's conception of philosophic sagacity.

5.5. Criticisms of sage philosophy

This section deals with Oruka's own doubts about his sage philosophy project, then deals with his supposed anti-feminism in relation to an entirely different project. Several criticisms have been levelled against Oruka's project by Oruka himself and by other scholars. Gail Presbey (1997) refutes Oruka's project on three counts. First, she examines Oruka's criticisms of his own project.

She argues that despite Oruka's pride in launching the sage philosophy project, he himself had some doubts about it. An example can be seen in Oruka's essay 'Philosophy in East Africa and the Future of Philosophical Research in Africa', where he refers to his sage philosophy project and that of Claude Sumner (who did a lot of research in Ethiopian philosophy) as projects that were limited to a historical context and would soon give way to other trends which he considers central to the future of African philosophy—such as professional philosophy and nationalist–ideological philosophy. Moreover, even though

Oruka criticized the work of Tempels and other ethnophilosophers, he confesses that his own analysis is a combination of anthropology and philosophy.

Oruka affirms, in *Sage Philosophy Revisited*, that he started his sage philosophy project as a counter to the negative claim by Europeans that Africans are not capable of philosophizing. If this negative perception by Europeans changed, would it suggest that professional philosophers cease looking for wisdom among indigenous African sages? Yet, Oruka continues to suggest that his project serves just as a 'base' or 'raw materials' for other forms of philosophy which will emerge in the future which he cannot imagine right now. By 'base' or 'raw materials', he implies that he is collecting indigenous African texts on which professional academic philosophers can base their research, rather than always choosing from European texts for their future works (Oruka 1997:184-185). Furthermore, Oruka posits that even though analysing the thoughts of indigenous Africans who are deeply rooted in their culture would be an important input of Africa to the rest of the world, he contradicts himself when he notes that analysing ethnological beliefs would be of little or no impact in the modern debate on philosophy or science (ibid.237-238). In other words, Oruka seeks to reinforce his modernist position by asserting that the ethnological beliefs epitomized by those he calls 'folk sages' would hardly make much impact on modern science and philosophy.

In Gail Presbey's opinion, Oruka's criteria for one's eligibility as a sage are discriminatory. Oruka insists in *Sage Philosophy* that neither age nor gender is a necessary condition for one to become a sage. However, in his book (Oruka 1991:87-157) we see that of the 12 sages, there is only one young man (Chaungo Barasa, born in 1960) and one woman (Peris Njuhi Muthoni, who happens to be a folk sage). This lends credence to Presbey's critique and calls for suspicion on why sages are generally referred to as 'wise old men', in line with the general cultural prejudice that men are superior to women. Oruka (1991:5) cites some anti-feminist philosophers such as Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, and some of his sages to justify the influence of culture on people whether they are sages or philosophers. He cites the influence of Ancient Greek culture on Plato and Aristotle, who did not see slaves as having the worth of human beings, and the racist attitudes of Kant and Hegel (Oruka 1991:4-5). However, I think Oruka clearly states non-discriminatory criteria when he notes that neither age nor gender is a necessary condition for one to become a sage. The fact that in practice he did not find or list many women or young people is emphatically not evidence of discrimination in his criteria.

5.6. Methodological and definitional objections

Kaphagawani (1987) contends that philosophic sagacity is second-order philosophy to ethnophilosophy and could not exist without the latter:

> What is said to hold for culture philosophy, particularly the claim to provide a picture as representative as theoretically possible, is also true of ethnophilosophy. Philosophic sagacity, in this case, becomes therefore a second order system of ethnophilosophy. If that is conceded, then philosophic sagacity cannot survive in the absence of ethnophilosophy. […] Philosophic sagacity, therefore, is not antagonistic to ethnophilosophy; it seems, rather, to be complementary to ethnophilosophy or culture philosophy. The fundamental difference, however, lies in the difference in assumptions; ethnophilosophy is premised on the holistic assumption whereas philosophic sagacity sets out from the assumption of non-holism.[109]

Kaphagawani's position equates culture philosophy to ethnophilosophy and postulates philosophic sagacity as second-order philosophy to ethnophilosophy. This explains why he does not see any contention between the two, and so he negates Oruka's exclusionist and antagonistic polarization of the two approaches. Even though there is a basic difference in both approaches, he thinks that a reconciliation of both approaches could benefit African philosophers. Oruka (1991) contests Kaphagawani's position by arguing that philosophic sagacity is a consequence of culture philosophy and not ethnophilosophy. As a trend of thought, Oruka argues, ethnophilosophy is much more recent than culture philosophy, which dates back to the days of the ancients. Such a position only validates our project in intercultural philosophy, which questions the very conception of 'culture' on which philosophic sagacity is based.

Lansana Keita (1985) rejects Oruka's claim (Oruka 1983:384) that philosophic sagacity is the movement in African philosophy best equipped to give an acceptable-to-all decisive blow to the position of ethnophilosophy. Such a view, Keita argues, is not fully defensible since it can be shown that philosophic sagacity as defined by Oruka himself is a mere revision of the principles of ethnophilosophy. Furthermore, the thesis put forward by Oruka that philosophic sagacity differs from ethnophilosophy (culture philosophy) because philosophic sagacity entails critical personal thought, while ethnophilosophy does not, cannot

[109] Kaphagawani (1987) in Oruka (1991:187).

be sustained. This is because, as Keita continues, an individual thinker or a restricted group of thinkers must have first initiated any belief system before it becomes a generally accepted belief system. Moreover, the novelty of such belief systems would derive their characterization from the fact that they must have been founded on critical analyses of existing belief systems.

Again, Oruka's thesis that philosophic sagacity has a stronger claim than professional philosophy and nationalist–ideological philosophy to helping in the development of a genuine African philosophy—on the basis that these are 'generally suspected of smuggling Western techniques into African philosophy' (Oruka 1983: 384)—is surely open to criticism. In the first place, it is unclear what Oruka means by 'Western techniques'. Professional philosophers are accused of *smuggling* Western techniques into African philosophy. Is smuggling these Western techniques into African philosophy not inevitable? Writing, academic organizations, publication of journals, and conferment of degrees are among some Western techniques that create and maintain philosophy. Could we do without such Western techniques and still have African philosophy, of whatever designation? Moreover, could the meeting of the so-called Western techniques and African ones not produce newly enriching techniques for contemporary human experience?

5.7. Orality and writing in sage philosophy

The influence of colonial bias against unwritten thought was also challenged by Oruka's project. By publishing his interviews with sages, he aimed to counter the denigration of African thought and the claim that:

> [p]hilosophy is and can only be a 'written' enterprise; a tradition without writing is incapable of philosophy [and that any claim to the contrary][…] is a non-scientific, mythological claim. (Oruka 1991:1)

Oruka's project revealed that one is likely to find indigenous thinkers who are illiterate. His stance is contrary to the views of his fellow professional philosophers such as Hountondji, Bodunrin, and Keita, who maintain that there can be no philosophy without writing.[110]

[110] See Bodunrin (1981); Hountondji (1983); and Keita (1985).

Oruka asserts that to exist as a philosopher it is not necessary that one's thought be written down or that one must progress—meaning that a philosopher must be commented on and available to future generations. Sufficient for the existence of a philosopher is that one's contemporaries recognize one's philosophical ability and practice (Oruka 1991:53). Oruka's position implicitly contests the central point in the long tradition of Western scholarship, popularized by the works of Lévy-Brühl, which denied Africans the existence of organized systematic philosophical reflection and was against unwritten thought.

Nevertheless, the implications of this tradition of scholarship prompt a call for epistemological vigilance on our part. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, I think it is necessary to promote African philosophy today through writing, even though it is not a prerequisite for philosophic thought. Moreover, what Oruka implies is that it is not necessary for philosophers to have access to or knowledge of the views of their predecessors. The counter-argument to this view is that it is necessary for a philosopher's view to be available to a future generation. Bodunrin (1981) asserts that writing permits the systematic organization of philosophical reflections and helps in conserving ideas for eventual transmission for future generations. Even if writing is not a precondition for philosophy, its relevance cannot be underrated. It is therefore necessary for past philosophers to survive in the form of texts into the present so that philosophers will be abreast of past issues. The intersection between contemporaries and their predecessors makes philosophy a joint, enriching enterprise of philosophers of all epochs. Philosophers in every epoch give perfect answers to some questions and insufficient answers to others; so, when philosophical epochs intersect, it provides a platform for philosophers of a contemporary epoch to take what is good from their predecessors and make it theirs. In other words, contemporary philosophers should seize the opportunity of intersection of epochs not only to incorporate the best of their predecessors, but also to distinguish themselves from their predecessors and to judge them by reformulating, refining, and refocusing the problems of their predecessors.

In my opinion, historical pragmatism is philosophically laudable in that it recommends that historical experiences be taken seriously to learn from their strong points and avoid their weaknesses. Each society can learn much from their history, as the lessons of the past are indispensable for a better future. Historical realities, as painful or glorious as they may be, should not be relegated to the background as Oruka maintains. They must form part of our present reality. They give us the opportunity to correct mistakes of the past and to exercise the moral virtue of reconciliation, which is necessary for a collective and global survival. The position of historical pragmatism endorses the past as a reality, and learning

from the past does not imply that one becomes a prisoner of the past. Referring to colonialism, Senghor appreciates the lessons that blacks learned from the colonial powers and the contributions of Europeans towards the growth and development of Africa. The profundity of Senghor's appreciation and acknowledgement of Europeans is articulated in his book dedicated to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Here he compellingly and passionately writes:

> I repeat it; it is Europe, France who saved us. They did this by developing in us a reflection supported by facts and their comprehension, and auto-criticism and above all, by teaching us the values of black Africa […] It is Europe (such is the dialectic of life) […] who would make us discover the values of Negritude activating in us, to speak like Teilhard de Chardin, with the powers of the heart, the powers of reflection: co-reflection. (Senghor 1962:18-19)

The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) defends the idea of philosophers knowing or having access to the views of their predecessors. He adds that not knowing what the past philosophers have said is arrogant. On the contrary, knowing what our predecessors have said is a mark of respect for them and it bodes well for philosophy. Moreover, some philosophers may not even be recognized by their contemporaries but by a later age. The appeal of a philosopher's work may go beyond his contemporaries. Socrates and Jesus Christ, for example, were despised by their age but were recognized later as philosopher and messiah, respectively. Being a philosopher begins when a philosopher lives to a future age; itis not a matter of a consensus by the contemporaries of a philosopher as Oruka (1991:53) asserts. If the 'consensus' 2,000 and 2,400 years ago was no guide to the stature of Jesus Christ and Socrates, of what use is it likely to be in identifying sages in contemporary Africa? Hence, Oruka's 'consensus' criterion needs to be very strictly defined, and he should not limit a philosopher's readership to his/her contemporaries.

Oruka prefers the modern analysis of focusing on speaking and the oral text. Derrida criticizes this tendency and labels it phonocentric (Derrida 1981). The post-modern reader is the observer who has the power of interpreting a text (an event) that in modern terms belonged to the author. Oruka's wisdom piece is a *readerly text (lisible)*, written with the intention of communicating a specific, precise message. Oruka's text is enmeshed in a situation, a historical period, and a culture, and it must be understood in its context. It assumes a passive reader that merely takes in the message. The modern reader is passive, unlike the post-modern one who is active in the production and construction of the text.

Given that post-modernism is text-centred, we cannot limit sources of traditional wisdom to speech only. Our daily practices can also be valid sources of African wisdom.

The use of language by Oruka is also problematic. Language transforms truth into largely linguistic conventions, and truth can never be independent of language. According to Derrida, the relationship between name and meaning, the signified and signifier, is problematic (Derrida 1976). Meaning can never be clear, transparent beyond questioning or doubt. This process is one that is relational and always fluctuating. Even though language allows Oruka to identify, organize, and give meaning to a specific form of sagacity, at the same time it obscures the existential thrust of that sagacity. Mall also dismisses the ontological prejudices inherent in language-based philosophical interpretations:

> No thought is the messenger of Being itself, and no language is the original mother-tongue of Being. (Mall 1995:89)[111]

> Philosophy is not immanent to language. [...] That is why translating is in itself a process which deserves as much attention as the process of communication. (ibid.)[112]

Hence, language has limitations when it comes to expressing the essentials of human experience. Moreover, the multiplicity of human languages hinders perfect transmission from one language to another.

5.8. Greek sages and traditional African sages

Oruka was concerned about the Western image of Africa created under colonialism. While the sayings of numerous Greek sages, such as Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, and others Pre-Socratics, were regarded as philosophical, those of traditional African sages were not. He maintained that the ideas expressed by indigenous African sages were no different from those of the earlier Greeks. When recorded later in books, the sayings of Greek sages came to be

[111] Original: *Kein Denken is vom Sein selbst geschickt, und keine Sprache ist die eigentliche Muttersprache des Seins.* (Translated from the original by van Binsbergen (2003: 388)).

[112] Original: *Philosophie ist nicht reine Sprachimmanenz.* [...] *Die Übersetzung ist daher selbst ein Prozeß, der ebensoviel Beachtung verdient wie der Kommunikationsprozeß.*(Translated from the original by van Binsbergen (2003: 388)).

widely regarded as 'philosophical', and the people who produced them as 'philosophers' (Oruka 1991:1-2).

Oruka brought out what was in each case really the property of his interlocutors, not his own. He maintained that the sages he and his disciples interviewed were the owners of their own ideas. The Western-trained philosopher, he says, plays the role of philosophical provocation.

This raises a fundamental problem: Oruka relies very much on the Western model in searching for traditional wisdom in Africa. He falls prey to the hegemonic and totalizing pretensions of modern science. The canons of modern scholarship include objectivity, universality, and rationality. This Eurocentric bias is traceable in Early Modern times, when Europe's military, economic, and political power began to extend effectively to many parts of the world. This culminated in the 19th century in the Age of Colonialism. The intellectual side of this process was the view that European (and soon, general North Atlantic) culture, art and science (then mainly viewed as the legacy of Ancient Greece), religion (mainly Christianity), languages (mainly 'Aryan', i.e. Indo-European), and even bodily characteristics ('Caucasian') were considered incomparably superior to those of the rest of the world, and without historical debts to other continents. This hegemonic perspective has persisted even in the history of philosophy and science. The emergence of these two disciplines has continued to be attributed to the Pre-Socratic philosophers in the eastern and western fringes of the Ancient Greek world (Ionia, i.e. south-western Turkey, and Graecia Magna, i.e. South Italy). However, this hegemonic perspective is obsolete today. In the last few decades, there has been a decline of Western hegemony in the military, economic, scientific, artistic, and religious fields. In such fields as archaeology, cultural history, ancient history, anthropology, and philosophy, Eurocentric views have gradually been discarded in the course of the 20th century for a number of reasons: the impact of the decolonization of Asia and Africa; the increase in transcontinental migration; the emergence worldwide of the multicultural society with an eclectically globalizing culture; and counter-hegemonic intellectual movements such as Orientalism, post-modernism, Afrocentricity (including the *Black Athena* thesis), post-colonial theory and its African variant as represented by Mudimbe, and intercultural philosophy.

The point is that Oruka himself is aware of the hegemonic situation that has a certain Eurocentric bias. Yet, like many other African philosophers, he does not explicitly situate himself in the counter-hegemonic context. When Oruka distinguishes the folk sage from the philosophic sages, is it not a subtle way of strengthening the very hegemony he sets out to

challenge? His reaction is not counter-hegemonic enough but is based on a sameness with the West. This explains why he attempts to construct an African version of Western sagacity. He chides ethnophilosophers for starting with the strong and 'fallacious' assumption that African philosophy and Western philosophy must and can only be different (Oruka 1991:5). In his attempt to deconstruct the claim that Greek sages were philosophical while those of traditional Africa were not, Oruka finds philosophy among indigenous Africans who have not benefitted from modern education. Yet, it looks unfair that he does not extend this to ethnophilosophy, to the social organization, communal life, and practices of the people. Why would Oruka think that we could not derive wisdom from African knowledge traditions with global value? Did Africa receive only, and not give anything suitable for intercultural knowledge production? There is no need to appropriate African sagacity into the North Atlantic intellectual tradition or model as Oruka does. He could use the North Atlantic model as a resource, but there is no need to become subservient to that model alone. It would be more rewarding for Oruka to affirm the local wisdom tradition in the African context and then try to cross-fertilize it with other globally available wisdom traditions.

African sages, in post-modern times, should rather be different and, yet, complementary to the Ancient Greek sages. Difference implies multiplicity and fragmentation and highlights the local and the particular. This is opposed to universals that foster authoritarianism and destroy diversity and pluralism. For Derrida, any attempt to ground reality in one method or perspective is dubious because there are infinite and different realities. No particular worldview can claim to have a monopoly on the truth. Even though difference involves diverse cultural orientations, intercultural philosophy enables us not to limit our vision of philosophy. We need to go beyond these differences, but at the same time African sages must not necessarily be made to resemble the Ancient Greek sages. Hence, the method of our search for African wisdom must not only corroborate the Western model; both ought to be in perpetual exchange.

In the context of globalization and increasing interconnectedness, newer modes of wisdom become evident. Sages may be born, acquire, and administer wisdom in this context, and there is the possibility of mediating this wisdom beyond its initial society to a wider and even global society. This has recently been intensified by the spread of education, literacy, and the Internet. Intercultural philosophy respects cultural differences but goes beyond these differences and searches for universal elements in the different cultural orientations. This can be found through dialogue, in a bid to mutually enrich each cultural orientation. In this case,

there is a need for a kind of globalized sagacity, one that is not just limited to one context but transculturally relevant.

Bodunrin (1981) does not see why Oruka rejects two approaches that he likens to philosophic sagacity in Africa. These approaches are those of Marcel Griaule in his famous *Conversations with Ogotemmêli*, and the type of research carried out among the Yoruba of Nigeria by J.O. Sodipo and Barry Hallen, both of the University of Ife at the time. To these examples we may add *sangoma* wisdom (van Binsbergen 2003). Bodunrin sees Ogotemmêli as a custodian of ancestral tradition who displays a great philosophic sagacity in his exposition of the secret doctrines of his group. The research carried out by Sodipo and Hallen, according to Bodunrin, is similar to Oruka's work on philosophic sagacity. This is because the Yoruba *onisegun* (informers) selected are versed in Yoruba thought and so deserve philosophical attention. Sodipo and Hallen visited the informers and conducted a dialogue with them on, for example, the Yoruba concept of a person and other concepts of philosophical interest (Bodunrin 1981:162,168).

Bodunrin may endorse the work of Griaule, Hallen and Sodipo as forming part of the philosophic sagacity project. However, our study proposes wisdom that goes beyond just pronouncements or simply recording the beliefs and values of a people. How does this wisdom help the Dogon and the Yoruba? Would it not be better to look at this sagacity as practical knowledge (as in *sangoma* wisdom) which can be at the service of both the informants and the researchers? Could the rest of humanity not benefit from such wisdom? Moreover, these belief systems are not fixed but always 'at play' and changing.

Bodunrin pursues his critique of philosophic sagacity when he notes that it is confronted with a serious methodological problem—that of authorship (Bodunrin 1981:170). In his view, when a trained philosopher interviews a sage who in the end unveils his philosophical ideas, the product is a new creation. It is neither wholly the sage's nor the philosopher's. Against this background, we can postulate philosophic sagacity as a 'passive philosophy'. Must sages be provoked each time before they philosophize? Moreover, Oruka's focus on interviews with individual sages is rather abstract and the philosophical questions that the sages were confronted with are socially disconnected. A better approach could be from fieldwork experiences, sharing in the everyday life of the locality and personal contacts. This would create a better forum for an active interpretation of wisdom in society.

Interviews and participant observation as theories and methods used by Oruka are most likely to be utterly alien to the community under study. Interviews (with questions such as 'why', 'what', 'how') are violently intrusive for African subjects of study. These questions

violate the intimacy of the people concerned, place them continuously in a defensive position, and give the impression that the sages owe the professional philosopher an answer at all costs. African peoples, with the pain and sufferings of the colonial past, of slavery, and of the numerous practical dilemmas of individual and collective life do not deserve such pressure to answer basic questions about their lives and existences. Moreover, the interviews are conducted and oriented by the professional philosopher. It could have been more profitable and psychologically rewarding for Oruka to live and interact with the local community and to become involved in plain conversation with its members. This would underline the equality of researchers and their empathy with research subjects. In such encounters, there is no sense of superiority; they are facilitated by the fact that the researcher and the researched share the same position, unlike the case (as in interviews) where one operates from a hegemonic position. Hence, I do not think we need to totally endorse Oruka's fascination for oral wisdom from selected sages. It would be more profitable to also include practical wisdom, which helps the individual and community in their daily problems. This wisdom is practical in the sense that it can inform social action in an appropriate setting and even beyond.

In spite of Oruka's interviews and professionalism, the use of fieldwork is naively inductive and poses problems of access and representation. First, how does the interviewer gain access to cultural facts as they really are? Second, is the framing of these so-called findings in academic text not distorting? This is what van Binsbergen thinks about some anthropologists and the use of fieldwork:

> Anthropologists manage to do their work in fieldwork locations that tend to be distant and inhospitable, and here they think up spartan alternatives for the standard North Atlantic comforts that are temporarily denied to them. By the same token, they are inclined to improvise their way when it comes to epistemological and methodological foundations, thinking up their own solutions and, if they seek help in the process, limiting their search to the writings of fellow anthropologists. But often this does not yield enough. (van Binsbergen 2003:497-498)

Even with a completely *emic* approach, including the continuous validation of the researcher's interpretations in day-to-day actions and communication in a community, one cannot claim to reach an unproblematic, untainted understanding. Moreover, there is a need for what German sociologist and philosopher Jurgen Habermas (1984) describes as 'communicative action', which is acting in conjunction with others, based on mutual

deliberation and argumentation. This is possible because all human beings have the capacity for rationality, but Habermas recommends an intersubjective rationality that can make mutual understanding and communication possible. In this case, there is no hegemony between the researcher and the researched subject. The subject gains access to the object, the people studied can 'speak back', and interpretations can be questioned, confirmed, or adjusted as necessary. This process can become a source of pride and identity to the people studied.

Cameroonian philosopher Godfrey Tangwa (1997) does not see any reason for Oruka's qualification of philosophy and philosophers as 'sagacious' and his categorization of sages into folk and philosophic sages. This is because since sagacity is synonymous with wisdom, and since there is no definition of philosophy that does not include or, at least, imply the idea of wisdom, the term 'philosophic sagacity' is a somewhat redundant tautology. Secondly, Oruka's categorization of sages into folk and philosophic sages also bristles with problems. This is because within traditional African culture, strict compartmentalization of knowledge and specialization are not so pronounced. The philosophic depth and degree of a thought, statement, work, or discourse (verbal or written) can be determined by critical appraisal. Yet, one cannot be sagacious or wise all the time. There is no good philosopher who has not, at least sometimes, made questionable or even out rightly false or foolish statements. Hence, such compartmentalization should not be cast iron but plastic. Thirdly, Tangwa contests the erroneous assumption, largely shared by so-called academic philosophers, that any philosophy worth the name must be the work of some identifiable individual. This view is received from Western philosophy and culture, which are fiercely individualistic in theory and practice. He posits that African cultures and philosophies are deeply communal in outlook and practice. This explains why, in African culture, inventors and specialists usually do not take any personal credit for their ideas and work in society. Finally, like Lansana Keita, Tangwa counsels that Oruka's tendentious denigration of folk philosophy is missing the point. This is because if an individual's philosophy is really convincing, it will be influential; and, if it is influential, it will tend to become a folk philosophy within the community where it is influential. This implies that a successful individual philosophy will normally become a folk philosophy. To look down on folk philosophy is therefore to denigrate successful individual philosophies and to hold in high esteem rather those which, by their failure to convince, have remained the exclusive property of their proponents. In brief, each culture or community has its own folk philosophy, which is a result of individual positions.

5.9. Oruka's interviews with individual sages

Oruka's project of sage philosophy focuses on texts from many interviews with individual sages. A brief biographical sketch and photograph precedes each interview. This practice stands in contrast to the ethnophilosophical practice, in which the views of informants (often anonymous) are summarized in the search for a common denominator (Presbey 2007), collective thought is emphasized, and meaning is sought in collective practices.

Oginga Odinga: His Philosophy and Beliefs (1992) is the first book in the Sage Philosophy Series, edited by Oruka. The main purpose of this series is to demonstrate the existence of individualized philosophies in Africa (Oruka 1992:21). By detecting the African sage and acting as midwife, Oruka helps the sage produce his or her wisdom for posterity. Oruka's conversations with Odinga focus on diverse issues, such as truth, morality, and compromise in politics. The individual sage Odinga is presented in this book as one such African sage renowned for his Africanist and international role as a staunch nationalist thinker and activist. Oruka even thinks Odinga is very much like the British philosopher Bertrand Russell in his unfaltering 'love for truth', unrelenting 'will for independence', and 'deepest sympathy with the suffering masses' (ibid.3).

Oruka's method in identifying individuals is greeted by Wiredu as the first to give 'substantial notice' of individual philosophical thinkers in Africa (Wiredu 1996:116), and Nigerian philosopher Emmanuel Eze (1999) credits Oruka with correctly emphasizing the importance of retaining the identity of individual thinkers. Hountondji (2002), in spite of his fierce criticisms of ethnophilosophy, claims he was impressed with Griaule's work because it focused on an individual. He also credits Griaule for transcribing the words of *one* man, the guardian of ancestral tradition and the slavish mouthpiece of group wisdom. Hountondji does not hide his appreciation for Griaule:

> Voluntarily assigning to himself the humble task of a secretary, custodian, transcriber of the worldview of *a* black sage, of *one* spiritual master among others, the French ethnologist gave the example of scientific patience and, in my eyes, did more useful work than the ethnophilosophers proper who were in a hurry to reach definitive conclusions on African philosophy in general. (Hountondji 2002:99)

The quotation shows that Hountondji does not hide his preference for the individual over the communal and anonymous views held by ethnophilosophers. Hountondji also

appreciates Oruka's emphasis on the merits of individual sages in his sage philosophy project. Here is Hountondji on Griaule:

> He showed the possibility of a long-term project which would consist of a systematic transcription of such speeches, at least as a starting point of a critical discussion—what my Kenyan colleague the late Odera Oruka would later call 'philosophical sagacity'—rather than as a reconstruction of implicit philosophy behind the habits and customs of the host society through a lot of non-verifiable hypotheses which always amount to overinterpreting the facts. (Hountondji 1996: ix)

I think Hountondji missed the updates on Dogon studies highlighted in Chapter 2. It is not a folk sage producing myth, nor a philosophic sage Oruka is hunting for. The story in *Conversations with Ogotemmêli* is typical of the hegemony of the West and the hermeneutical problems of fieldwork I mention in this work. Griaule started with notions of négritude, already discernible in his *Masques dogons* (1938), assuming he would find in Africa a philosophy on a par with the best Greek and Indian philosophy had to offer(Griaule & Dieterlen 1954:83). And so he did, with Ogotemmêli, after long prodding and much re-structuring and re-writing. Yet, it is Griaule's definition of what 'deep philosophy' is, and Greece and India are still the models. He then disguises this process as 'the humble task of a secretary', not as some sleight of hand, in my opinion, but out of genuine belief (the 'prejudice' of Gadamer) that he had found the deep structures of Dogon thought in a spectacular and coherent myth. As we mentioned in Chapter 2, the Dogon do not know anything about this myth, and Hountondji does not take this up. So the Ogotemmêli case illustrates very well the Western power-of-definition (Foucault) of what constitutes sagacity/wisdom and what constitutes a proper myth. It also demonstrates the hermeneutic hegemony of North Atlantic views of what 'constitutes' Africa: Africa as the source of deep wisdom—but of a kind that is defined, judged, and appreciated by the West.

Presbey (2007) defends the view that Oruka did not just cite anyone as a sage, because even his folk sages had standing and reputation in their communities. She asserts that by naming individual sages, Oruka thought the sages were unique and interesting individuals who deserved to be known beyond their local communities. The worth of these sages, she maintains, is found not only in their ideas but also in the way they live, embody philosophy, develop their character over the years, and have affected their communities. Hence, the sages do not just articulate wise sayings but also have practical relevance in their respective

communities; they are wise men and women committed to the moral betterment of their communities (Oruka 1991:3).[113] Oruka even challenges Tempels' followers to identify the individual philosophers in the Bantu community:

> Since the affirmation of an African philosophy is logically the affirmation of the existence of African philosophers, it is important that Tempels' followers go ahead and identify those philosophers. It is not too late to do so even forty years after Tempels, as we have done through our study of the sages. (Oruka 1990:11)

5.10. Beyond the modern individual author

In this section, let us try to see why Oruka is fascinated with the individual as the philosopher *par excellence*. The reason is that in a modern context, the individual is the subject, the author. He is the one who produces books, articles, and pamphlets. If the resulting text is regarded as the product of genius, and if it is approached with reverence and the expectation of revelation, then the prestige of the author is enhanced. The modern individual author is a specialist, a professional educator, and an intellectual. He has a superior position to educate, instil moral values, or enlighten the reader, who is not held in such high regard. These individuals assume privileged access to truth, reason, and scientific knowledge. The modern subject has confidence in reason, rationality, and science, and puts all of these above emotion.

The above presentation of the modern individual author is largely exploited by Oruka in his distinction between the folk sages and philosophic sages. As we have seen earlier, the folk sages are second-best to the philosophic sages, who are said to have superior qualities. Folk sages engage in 'popular wisdom' and are first-order thinkers and conformists, while the philosophic sages engage in 'didactic wisdom' and are critical, second-order thinkers (Oruka 1991:33). Folk sages do not engage in critical thought, see any inherent contradictions in traditions, or isolate their opinions from the communal beliefs (ibid.34). They can be herbalists, poets, medicine men, musicians, or fortune-tellers. Their explanations or thoughts, according to Oruka, do not go beyond the premises and conclusions provided by the prevailing culture. The philosophic sage, on the other hand, engages in critical reflection on the first order. Whereas the first order seeks and enhances the communal consensus, the

[113] For more on the ethical relevance of sagacity, see Presbey (1996, 2000, 2002).

second-order philosophic sagacity is doubtful of communal consensus and employs reason to assess it (ibid.48-49).

Oruka justifies this distinction in his comparison of Griaule's Ogotemmêli, whom he considers a folk sage, with Paul Mbuya Akoko, whom he considers a philosophic sage. For him, Ogotemmêli says hardly anything that suggests a thought beyond the generally given and revered Dogon beliefs. Oruka is also quick in dismissing the Sodipo–Hallen approach, who had Yoruba *onisegun* as the professional group with whom they primarily worked. The views of the *onisegun*, Oruka contends, are representative of the thoughts of the ordinary Yoruba. They remain at the level of culture philosophy, which nasty observers can call cultural prejudices (ibid. 50).

The distinction between popular and didactic wisdom, according to Oruka, is not cast iron but plastic, as it fluctuates (ibid.33) between the two poles. This means that there are folk sages that can be philosophic sages as well. Nevertheless, Oruka does not respect that qualification in his categorization of sagacity. This explains van Hook's (1995) proposal that Oruka's categorization of sages into 'folk' and 'philosophic' be more flexible than Oruka advocates. He wonders why Oruka does not consider their views as philosophical (ibid.58). Gail Presbey thinks that the folk sages even show talent that is more philosophical that Oruka's description of them would make us believe. She thinks folk sages should be included as philosophic sages because some of the sages distinguish their views from those of their communities on at least one topic (Presbey 2007:142-143). Instead of distinguishing folk sages from philosophic sages, she thinks that the distinction often occurs within the same individual sage. The individual sage is even an 'active interpreter of tradition' (ibid.143). Presbey may be right in her refutation of Oruka on this point, but our study shows that we cannot limit the construction of wisdom just to the individual. A culture is, by definition, a collective thing, being shared by thousands and usually millions of people. Such a cultural orientation is inherently diverse and inconsistent. Moreover, the individual merges with the ever-changing community in a bid to face daily problems. Hence, Presbey needs to broaden her conception of community. She could include the *onisegun*, for example, who are African avenues for forging and maintaining communities and not just individuals. The fact that the folk sages have a mastery of their cultural beliefs suggests their interest in their respective communities. Could this not be a valid base for an African social and political philosophy?

Furthermore, we need to revise who the individual author, text, and reader are in this globalized post-modern world. For Foucault, there is no author among primitive people. Authorship, he contends, is a concoction of modern bourgeoisie hegemony, which

emphasizes the importance of the individual. A post-modern author has a more modest role, making no universal truth claims and having no ready-made prescriptions to offer. This suggests that no philosopher or empirical researcher can claim to have a privileged position from which to survey the world and obtain authority for their pronouncements (Guattari 1992). In an unexplored, global world, the author strives to bring a text with diverse meanings and interpretations. It is a text that does not pursue the truth but one that elevates the experience alone.

Nietzsche doubts the existence of a thinking, feeling subject who reasons logically and causally. For him, the subject is viewed as self-deceptive, lacking in consciousness, wilful, vengeful, and power-seeking and manifesting a 'repressed, nihilistic will to power' (Booth 1985:132-133). The Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) also questioned the status of a coherent, integrated, unified, modern subject. He eliminated the self-conscious subject and substituted a decentred, fragmented, and heterogeneous subject who was often unaware of their unconscious. His was not a 'knowing' subject but rather a psychoanalytical subject better characterized by multiplicity, disunity, and self-deception than anything else. The post-modern individual is relaxed and flexible, oriented towards feelings and is a 'subject-in-progress' *à la* Kristeva(1986), an intercultural subject with no stable identity. Deleuze and Guattari assert that post-modernism effectively means the end of the subject (Deleuze & Guattari 1972, 1980, 1994).

Oruka's over-emphasis on the individuality of the philosophic sage, along with the sage's criticism of the community, is contested by some critics who qualify the entire project as 'un-African and subservient to the Western idea of philosophy' (Presbey 2007:144). The Nigerian philosopher Segun Gbadegesin contends that 'it is the view or belief of [some] Western philosophers that philosophy must be an individual enterprise', and he points out the contradiction in this Western philosophical idea of the importance of the individual: individualism as a value, he maintains, is dependent on a group consensus (Gbadegesin 1991:9). The South African philosopher W.J. Ndaba agrees that the ideal of philosophy as 'an individual, explicit, critical and self-critical ratiocinative consciousness' is a Western notion. Hence, laying emphasis on such Western foundations is 'counterproductive for the emergence of a genuinely rooted African philosophy' (Ndaba 1996: 17).

Furthermore, Oruka claims that the sages had not had any external contact or the benefit of modern education. How, then, does dialogue obtain between the sages and the visiting stranger anthropologists? Does this not suggest an ideological construct? Does this not portray the impact of globalization on contemporary Kenyan society? In this regard, Jay

van Hook (1995) argues that it is impossible in contemporary times for Oruka to claim that he interviewed indigenous thinkers who had not benefitted from Western education or values, or on whom these had not made an impact. Van Hook makes these significant remarks concerning the 12 sages presented by Oruka in *Sage Philosophy:*

> [...]three are identified as Christians, one a preacher in the Anglican church; one attended a colonial school; another talks about Socrates; one is identified as the son of an anti-European activist; and still another is described as inseparable from his radio and as having satisfied all his ambitions except owning a car. (van Hook 1995:54-65)

Oruka compliments one of the philosophic sages—Paul Mbuya Akoko— when he goes against the common Luo beliefs in their god and other gods, as Akoko claims that all these gods are one and that there is only one God(*Nyasaye*) (Oruka1991:137). However, this shows the influence of European missionaries on indigenous Luo concepts of religion and God. Gail Presbey opines that the idea of one God was what the missionaries taught the Luo when they entered Luoland. If Akoko said he learned it from foreign missionaries, however, it would have undercut the evidence adduced in the study. Moreover, Oruka does not explicitly show how Akoko negotiates the tension between his multiple identities. Oruka (ibid.134) states that Akoko was a member of the East African Legislative Assembly and believed in both Christianity and Luo traditional religion. He married two wives and had several children. In 1938, he published a book in the Luo language, *Luo Kitgi Gi Tembegi* ('Luo Customs and Habits'), and at the time of his death in 1981 he was the *Ker* (ultimate moral or spiritual leader) of the Luo. Akoko's case and the others noted by van Hook not only provide sufficient proof of external contacts but seriously undermine Oruka's claim for the existence of an indigenous isolated-from-the-West sagehood.

Oruka's monism and simplicity is interculturally untenable, as intercultural philosophy operates from a plural and complex platform. His sages were interviewed and his findings are limited to a 'culture', for these sages' wisdom exists in a specific context and is tied to that lone 'culture'. In a globalized context, where people, cultural values, and commodities are flowing in all directions and many boundaries are dissolving, we need to be cautious about Oruka's orientation on sagacity. Van Binsbergen, for example, merges a wider intercultural terrain in his conception and practice of *sangoma* wisdom. In his professional life as an anthropologist, he has been conversant, at the cultural and linguistic level, with at least four regional cultural complexes in Africa and Asia, in addition to the European

complex into which he was born. This explains why he negotiates *sangoma* wisdom from exchanges and cross-cultural influences to postulate a non-relativist epistemology—as opposed to Oruka's self-evident relativism, which is that of a researcher claiming his sages had never had the benefits of modern education or any external influence, when in fact a number of them had.

Furthermore, even though Oruka provides an acceptable modernist basis for an African philosophy, his interpretation of the concept of culture in contemporary times is mistaken. He recommends cultural anthropology as the method in sage philosophy and invites all philosophers to devote more time to it rather than create an 'iron curtain' between philosophy and anthropology (ibid.8-10). This conception of culture, and by extension cultural anthropology, is largely influenced by North Atlantic paradigms. Van Binsbergen (2003), for example, analyses anthropological research as a problematic mode of intercultural knowledge production. He argues that anthropological research depends on manipulated face-to-face relations, personal history, transference, and North–South hegemonic power. Moreover, relying on these anthropological paradigms, according to van Binsbergen, generates only more ethnic and political problems than it can solve. The paradigms breed a concept of 'culture' that displays only heavily holistic and essentialist traits, rendering the problematization of performative aspects of cultural identity naïve. Intercultural philosophy, on the other hand, reminds us that culture is not bounded, but performative.

5.11. Ethnophilosophy, unanimity and individual African critical thought

Another negative claim that Oruka aimed to challenge pertains to the philosophical status of indigenous African thought. Oruka sustains his challenge by joining Hountondji and Towa in criticizing ethnophilosophy.[114] Even though Ochieng'-Odhiambo (2002:19-32) claims that Oruka's position vis-à-vis ethnophilosophy evolved from an unwillingness to compromise, the founder of sage philosophy generally maintains a radically different position from ethnophilosophy. Oruka distinguishes sage philosophy from ethnophilosophy because ethnophilosophy had falsely popularized the view that traditional Africa was a place of philosophical unanimity and that African traditions encourage unanimity regarding beliefs and values.

[114] We discussed these criticisms in Chapter 2.

Oruka's critique of ethnophilosophy requires some comment here. First of all, he implicitly takes for granted the Western form of rationalist philosophy as the standard and universal mode. The misguided attempts he makes to champion supposed African equivalents of Socrates and Descartes perpetuate the erroneous idea that African societies are primitive, with an inferior form of rationality relative to some North Atlantic thinkers such as Kant and Hegel. Oruka, from his academic Western conception of philosophy, sees philosophy as the unique individual product of a unique individual mind. The rationalist position, from Plato to Descartes, constructed philosophy as a rational enterprise with mind over body. Plato's epistemology and metaphysics are intertwined and relate to his theory of Forms. These Forms are universal, stable essences that can be contemplated by detaching oneself from sensibility and establishing oneself in the intelligible world, where one can contemplate the Forms. Philosophy is reasoning and not in the senses. This explains why Descartes says, 'I think therefore I am' (*cogito ergo sum*). Oruka's fascination for this form of philosophy probably explains why he endorses the rationalist individual mind in his conception of philosophic sagacity.

Secondly, Oruka also subscribes to the immensely alienating myth of the human body as a machine (Sharp 2000; Smith et al.2004). In the Western tradition, the human body is seen as an industrial product which is uniform, standardized, and can be used as a model for advertisements. This explains why advertisements emphasize the young, healthy and perfect 'body'. Such a body is likened to a machine that has an 'engine' and needs 'check-ups'.

Thirdly, the Western conception endorses the myth of the fundamental closedness of the human person (van Binsbergen 2008). The human person is envisaged in two ways: in the first place, as a unique person or individual rather than as a person belonging to a group; and in the second place, as one whose mind is a closed system that cannot be penetrated by other minds. Hence, knowledge production is limited to the individual mind, as a rationalist thinker like Descartes would have it, and not the body.

However, African examples go beyond this Cartesian epistemology. Senghor refutes the rigid distinction between reason and emotion. He argues that Cartesian philosophy provides a rather distant, objective relationship between the thinking subject and reality. Such visual reasoning distinguishes subject and object and analyses the realm of objects in a rather sober way, reducing the possibilities of human emotional and social life. Senghor therefore complements visual reason with embracing reason, arguing that embracing reason is not an inferior but a complementary reason (Senghor 1967). This implies that we need not eliminate or ignore the human body in our conception of the search for wisdom as Oruka contrives to

do. African divination—*sangoma* divination, for example (see van Binsbergen 2003, especially Chapters 5, 6 and 7)—produces trance-like techniques of trans-individual sensitivity which can bring about a valid basis for non-sensory forms of knowledge transmission. In addition, we find much of African traditional wisdom centred on the human body. Africans use their bodies to celebrate their entire life cycle, death, and fertility. These rituals also include the symbolic relationship between the body and the land, the body and socio-political institutions. When the body moves in space and time during dance and music, it enables the individual to experience its social and cosmological status. During healing practices, the link between worldview, social organization, and body are restored. In this process Africans not only redress and restore, but also recreate the human individual. The African traditional wisdom of the body, expressed and mobilized in every ritual act of therapy, contrasts with the alienating bodily practices of the North Atlantic region (often more restrictive and rigid) and of a world religion such as Christianity (as it developed after Christ, from Paul onwards), which have dominated the world to date. African corporeal wisdom today, such as healing, music, sexual practices, and dancing, has not only continued to be important to African people but has also been reformulated into a global format (van Binsbergen 2008).

Oruka's final criticism of ethnophilosophy is that it is largely grounded in mythical representations of reality. First, he separated myths from the clearly thought out and logically valid philosophical ideas of indigenous individual thinkers to make clear what he frequently refers to as the 'anthropological fogs'. Secondly, he contested the idea that a qualitative mental leap from myth is required for Africans to embrace philosophical thought (Oruka 1972, 1975, 1997). As we discussed in Chapter 2, Oruka's position on myth as falsehood is naïve and superficial. It is essentially the rationalist position, which helps us to construct ourselves as rational philosophers but may not provide us with a full understanding of culture, ideology, ethics, morality, the appeal of truth, and so on. Such a position misconstrues myth as static and fails to conceive of history as an evolving process.

Dismas Masolo (1994:237) is also critical of philosophic sagacity. His main argument is that philosophic sagacity is not philosophy. True philosophy, for him, relies on analysis, definition, and explanation. Oruka's sages may have a mastery of their traditions and be highly opinionated, but this is insufficient reasoning. Traditions and opinion are discarded in

the method of Socrates.[115] The sages fall into the category of Pre-Socratic knowledge, and this has no place in strict philosophy. The various discussions Oruka conducts with his sages, according to Masolo, lack a certain rigour and conceptualization which are essential elements of philosophy. This explains why he also contests Oruka's treatment of pre-literate sages as proto-philosophers.

Oruka's conception of wisdom/sagacity as abstract thinking, limited to the mind, and which can be retrieved only via interviews (Oruka 1991:35-36) needs serious re-thinking. Wisdom is not just theoretical or abstract thought (*sophia*) as Oruka makes us understand when he interviews his sages. Wisdom is also practical (*phronesis*), as in *sangoma* wisdom. In his conception of *phronesis*, Heidegger argues that it gives emphasis to our 'being-in-the-world', beyond theoretical understanding. It constitutes a way of self-knowledge of our own existential and practical situation. This enables Gadamer to conceive understanding as a practical, situated, and dialogical activity. A richer approach to African traditional wisdom would be to explore both *sophia* and *phronesis* in African traditional society, and not focus exclusively on *sophia* as Oruka does in his sage philosophy.

Some examples of viable African traditional wisdom, which could complement or act as alternatives to global science and which have potentially global applicability, are the following: first, as mentioned above, there is the human body; second, there are African local-level practices of conflict resolution and reconciliation; and third, there is comparative mythology, which offers promising models for the exploration and expression of traditional African wisdom (van Binsbergen 2008). These examples of African traditional wisdom strengthen the message that African sagacity should not be conceived as a theoretical and academic endeavour far removed from the many problems Africans face today—a distance we noted in Oruka's interviews and articulations of philosophic sagacity—but rather as a way of contributing to the practical dilemmas of individual and collective life. Hence, Oruka could have benefitted not just by interviewing sages on issues related to knowledge and philosophy, but also by living within the neighbourhood of thinkers, sharing their everyday lives and having personal contacts with them (as Kai Kresse did in Mombasa, Kenya). Kresse (2007) lived among the Muslim community, learned Swahili, and did not conduct interviews

[115] The Socratic method as practised by the early Greek philosopher Socrates (c. 470–399 BCE) involves proposing a definition, rebutting it by counter-example, modifying it in the light of the counter-example, rebutting the counter-example, and so forth. The Socratic method, through dialogue, helps the implied/intended meaning to be born—hence Socrates likens it to a midwife's action. The method can help advance the understanding of concepts and improve arguments or positions.

per se. He listened to the intellectuals during their philosophical discourses with the other members of the community, and he also read their poems and lectures. Even when he jotted down the discourses of the thinkers in their social context, he added his own comments separately from the original discourses (Kresse 2007). Oruka could also 'become a *sangoma*', as van Binsbergen did during field work in southern Africa.

5.12. Situating sagacity between universalism and particularism

Oruka does not see the tension and implications between universalism and particularism. Even though there are still debates on the relationship between universals and particulars, philosophers agree that a universal is a common property.[116] It refers to a characteristic common to every member of a particular culture or to every human being. When things have the same identity, property, kind, or class, they fall under a universal. The notion of universals, pertaining to the common features found in particular things, enables us to form concepts, by sorting universals or classifying them. Particular things are individuals, distinct objects that are in only one place at any given time. However, particulars fall under types and always have properties, which can appear in other particulars at the same time. In this way, universals are closely tied to particulars and cannot exist outside them. In a sense, universals are the other side of particulars. These two are always found together and refer to aspects of the same thing: universals refer to the common properties, and particulars refer to the unique things.

Oruka conceives sagacity as something for the wider academic audience but limits it at the theoretical level. He denigrates the practical side of sagacity and dismantles the interaction between the sages and their contexts. Moreover, he borrows from the universalizing perspective of philosophy, applies it to the African context, and claims it is 'African'. Western wisdom traditions can blend with African traditions, as Oruka shows, but this translatability must be explicit. Philosophic sagacity, contrary to what Oruka contrives, can be seen as part of humanity's shared, global heritage of thought. It is therefore justifiable to conceive of sagacity as both universal and particular. The new vision of sagacity ought to be one that encourages diversity and pluralism without losing sight of our common humanity.

[116] Even outside philosophy, there is renewed interest in the study of universals, especially in comparative mythology, which has repeatedly posed the important question of how the many (near) universals found in the cultural expressions of anatomically modern humans can be explained and sustained, and how such universals can be reconstructed methodologically through comparative mythology.

African traditional wisdom is not limited to the African context, but it can be translated globally. Hence, the tension between universalism and particularism does not need to be destroyed. This can provide complementary ways to North Atlantic science and be a way to help the rest of the world. There is no need for Oruka to fall prey to the claims inherent to the North–South knowledge construction, where the hegemonic subordination of Africans and their life-worlds persists. In our search for African sagacity, we need to conceive of Africa as part of the world of humankind as a whole.

5.13. Conclusion

The focus in this chapter has been to present the inherent weaknesses in Oruka's philosophic sagacity. Oruka's methodological and definitional weaknesses were discussed above. We tried to see if from a modernist standpoint he achieves his objectives. Oruka leans on the assumption that wisdom can only be found in human intelligence and human will. Such a premise or metaphysical stance, in the mind of Heidegger, encourages individual loneliness, alienation, unfulfillment, and social destructiveness (Heidegger 1996). We also saw that Oruka's philosophic sagacity is largely a Western heritage and heavily dependent on Western thought. The Western power/knowledge system has had far-reaching implications for the constitution of knowledge about African realities. Oruka is implicitly aware of the hegemonic situation, but he does not explicitly situate his philosophic sagacity in a counter-hegemonic framework. His project ends up only propagating the West and gives the impression that Africa can receive only and not give. Such a conception is highly problematic, especially in contemporary times characterized by interactions between peoples from all corners of the globe. We have tried to examine Oruka's intention to counter three negative claims regarding the philosophical status of indigenous African thought. Nevertheless, Oruka's project rather propagates the West and its hegemony in African philosophy. The task of revising Oruka's methodology is in a bid to propose one that is current with contemporary concerns. Contemporary worries and challenges invite us to pose a new way for searching into traditional wisdom. The various insights, findings, and conclusions in the previous chapters suggest that an up-to-date sagacity, sensitive to various contemporary concerns, should be fluid and flexible rather than fixed and unchanging. Our search for traditional wisdom needs to be modest and open to discussion and reconsideration, to challenge, and to redefinition and re-articulation by new actors and in new contexts.

6

PHILOSOPHIC SAGACITY IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY: PROPAGATING THE WEST?

6.1. Introduction

In the introductory Chapter 1 and in Chapter 5, I briefly presented two schools of thought with clearly divergent positions in African academic philosophy: those with a universalizing perspective, and those with a particularizing perspective. These two schools of thought accuse each other of playing into the hands of colonial and neo-colonial oppression. The universalists, for example, accuse the particularists of settling for an inferior and idiosyncratic conception of philosophy, which lacks the intellectual rigour of Western professional philosophy and thereby virtually guarantees its own marginalization in the world market. The particularists, on the other hand, accuse the universalists of letting the West dictate the rules and agenda of the philosophical enterprise, thus playing the game as their oppressors would have it played and guaranteeing its irrelevance to the issues and struggles of Africans. These accusations and counter-accusations point to the fact that colonial experiences have had a profound impact on African studies/philosophy. Mudimbe argues that until now Western interpreters as well as African analysts have been using categories and conceptual systems that depend on a Western epistemological order. The cultural orientations and prejudices of the authors are so glaring that African academic philosophy is virtually reduced to an extension of Western philosophical traditions into the African context. In other words, he sees these authors as African collaborators in imposing an alien order of knowledge on Africa.

In this chapter, I demonstrate the implications for African philosophy of Oruka's uncritical acceptance of North Atlantic categories in his conception of philosophic sagacity. Does this mean that we cannot conceive of African traditional systems of thought or make them explicit? In this chapter, I present colonialism as a hegemonic project that uses anthropology, as a science, to foster the mercantilistic ideology of colonialists. I posit that the Western power/knowledge system has had far-reaching implications for the constitution of knowledge about African realities. This hegemonic imposition challenges me to bring out the relevance of an epistemology of interculturality.

6.2. Colonialism and Western hegemony in academic African philosophy

If we take a critical look at academic African philosophy or African studies as an interdisciplinary field in general, we quickly notice that it is largely reactionary. It does not matter whether any particular scholar is writing for or against the West; we realize that the West is at the heart of African knowledge production. Western theories are used as tools of this hegemony, as they are applied universally, on the erroneous assumption that Western experiences fit the entire human experience. The Nigerian sociologist Oyeronke Oyewumi observes that African thought, be it universalist or particularist in orientation, has always centred not on dissimilarity from the West but on similarity with the West. This explains why African philosophers have accepted and identified so much with the Western approach to philosophy that they attempted to create its African versions. Hence, Western models are propounded and African cultural orientations are described from the 'outside-in' and not the 'inside-out'. Oruka also falls prey to this, together with many African philosophers who are locked into embracing Western hegemony without trying to engage in exchange in an intercultural context. However, what accounts for the persistence of North Atlantic models in African scholarship?

6.3. Colonial invention of Africa

The 'scramble for Africa' and the most active period of colonization took place between the end of the 19th and the mid-20th centuries. Even though the colonial experience was a relatively brief period, it influenced new forms of discourse on African traditions and cultures. The colonial experience reveals that colonial masters aimed at organizing and transforming non-European territories into essentially European constructs (Mudimbe 1988). The colonial structure was designed to ensure the domination and marginalization of the colonies. In this way, these structures controlled the spiritual, human, and physical aspects of the entire colonizing experience. They denied any attributes of humanity to the colonized peoples, and this dehumanization was achieved by physical and mental violence. Even though African countries have been granted independence, the North Atlantic hegemony is still very visible in all domains.

This hegemonic relationship is also identifiable in knowledge production. It follows, therefore, that knowledge production about Africa is never unbiased but hegemonic or

counter-hegemonic—that is, it strengthens a particular hegemonic structure or seeks to destroy that structure. This means that knowledge production is always characterized by the vested interests of those producing it. On the one hand, those producing knowledge have in mind to establish power over those to whom the knowledge will be applied. This also means relegating other modes of knowing, which may not correspond with the interests of those in the ruling authority, as invalid or irrational. These can include the magical, mythical, and other sources of esoteric knowing. On the other hand, knowledge production can be counter-hegemonic, an alternative form of knowing from the ruling authority or scientific circle or institution in power. This dominance or resistance is a pointer to the fact that knowledge production is not neutral.

Against this conceptual framework, Mudimbe largely leans on the works of French philosophers such as Derrida and Foucault and the French sociologist Bourdieu for his archaeological constructions. For example, he uses Foucault's paradigm of power/knowledge to deconstruct the Eurocentric invention of Africa.[117] He states:

> The history of knowledge in Africa and about Africa appears deformed and disjointed, and the explanation lies in its own origin and development. (Mudimbe 1988:175)

Mudimbe's comment is reminiscent of Foucault's claim to have found, in his archaeological method, a series of discontinuous 'created realities' or epistemes, that serve in each era as the ground of the true and the false. However, since these epistemes are a social given, there can be no appeal to any absolute truth of things (unless 'absolute truth' is part of the particular episteme, but that would mean such a concept is merely a construct of social discourse and not 'absolute' at all). Here, Foucault is anti-Hegelian. Where Hegel saw the working out of history as Absolute Reason becoming self-conscious, Foucault saw history as a series of discontinuities, one following the other but with no hint of true progress.

Mudimbe describes how the Europeans used their ability to dominate Africans, with the major hypothesis that Africans must evolve from their primitive and frozen state to the dynamic and civilized state of their Western counterparts. Europeans did not just place

[117] See also Said (1978). He argues that power and knowledge are central in the way Occidentals claim to have knowledge of the Orient. It is this knowledge that allowed Occidentals to change the Orient into imperial colonies. This power/knowledge binary relation is vital for our understanding of colonialism, and it shows us that the thought patterns in Africa, Europe, and Asia can hardly be neutral relative to the hegemonic or counter-hegemonic representations of power.

Africans below European humanity, but they used their science and rationality to complete the subjugation of the African mind, body, and lands. This was achieved through the Atlantic slave trade and colonization. According to Mudimbe:

> Evolution, conquest and difference become signs of a theological, biological, and anthropological destiny, and assign to things and beings both their natural slots and social mission. Theorists of capitalism, such as Benjamin Kidd and Karl Pearson in England, Paul Leroy-Beaulieu in France, Friedrich Naumann and Friedrich von Bernhard in Germany, as well as philosophers, comment upon two main complementary paradigms. These are the inherent superiority of the white race, and, as already made explicit in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, the necessity for European economies and structures to expand to 'virgin areas' of the world. (ibid.17)

Mudimbe's observation enables us to see clearly that the West is at the centre of everything, while Africa is left out on the margin. Colonialism was principally aimed at subjugating and re-inventing the 'inferior' African in a bid to exploit Africa's economic resources. Discourses on African studies/philosophy emanate from, and are engulfed in, colonialism and its hegemonic project.[118]

This observation by Mudimbe stems from an image he has of three figures from Western culture that were central to the construction of Eurocentric stereotypes, concerning colonial dependencies generally and Africa in particular: the explorer, the soldier, and the missionary. Of the three, the missionary played the most profound role in destroying and subsequently transforming traditional societies. This is because the missionaries held important spiritual, moral, and educative responsibilities in Africa. Since missionary discourse was associated with reason, history, and power (Mudimbe 1988), they thought they could use it to 'civilize' pre-colonial societies. Nevertheless, a missionary like Tempels' could encounter the Baluba and be led to have different feelings. Mudimbe is correct in his contention:

[118] For African thinkers who address the issue of Africa as a victim of colonialism and where her interests could lie in social, political, and economic development, we need to mention Césaire, Fanon, Memmi, Senghor, and Nkrumah.

> Rather than as a philosophical treatise […] *Bantu Philosophy* could be understood simultaneously as an indication of religious insight, the expression of cultural doubt about the supposed backwardness of Africans, and a political manifesto for a new policy for promoting 'civilization' and Christianity. (ibid.50)

This new policy, in my opinion, should be interculturally motivated, a policy free from hegemony and essentialist connotations. Tempels' meeting with the Baluba did not permit him just to create a new community; it also caused him to study and appreciate the complex situations which arose from such encounters. In meeting the Other, Tempels found his own meaning: the fact that he is. True meaning and understanding of oneself can only be reached by a meeting with the Other in all its strangeness. This Other remains a puzzle, but a puzzle that can nevertheless reveal secrets. The concomitant forgetting of self leads to real communication and justice. The human being is *Dasein*, 'being-in-the-world' and encountering other beings.

Hence, Western hegemony, with its attendant Christianity and capitalism, may have affected Africans negatively, but it has also certainly provided methodological alternatives and insights into our lives. Westerners give us new ways of conceiving identity and belonging. The African, in this context, should neither be just a passive receiver of cultural achievements coming from outside nor be confined to the role of a giver of cultural achievements—rather, one who combines the role of both giver and receiver of cultural achievements. This will be much more rewarding in our philosophizing in contemporary conditions of globalization, instead of the outright abandonment to Western hegemony as Mudimbe maintains.

It may be instructive to note the transcontinental elements in African philosophy. We can recognize African philosophy as localized and particularizing, but we need to look at the universalizing, transcontinental components as well. This promising transcontinental orientation will enable us to integrate African philosophy into other global traditions of philosophy. It will also act as a line of connection or a rhizome of transcontinental interconnectedness, from which to contribute to or tap resources, from the local to the global.[119]

[119] For more on this discussion, see the various contributions in 'Lines and Rhizomes: The Transcontinental Element in African Philosophies', a special issue of *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy/ Revue Africaine de Philosophie* 21, 2007.

Mudimbe himself observes that Christianity has been inculturated in Africa, unlike the situation that obtains today in Europe. He notes the Africanization of European Christianity:

> If European Catholicism seems to be aging dangerously, the dynamism of its African counterpart belongs either to a holy nightmare or, if one prefers, to an incredible miracle: monasteries are being built; new religious movements, both activist and charismatic, are appearing and organizing themselves successfully; there are not enough schools for potential catechists, nor are there sufficient convents for nuns. (ibid.54-55)

This adaptation of European Christianity can be explained in terms of consumerism caused by the dynamics of contemporary cultural globalization. Through communication processes, a world religion like Christianity has gained a metalocal distribution, and Africans are taking part in this distribution because it satisfies their desires. Since they live in a plurality of overlapping cultural orientations, Christianity, for example, is one of those religious alternatives that Africans are appropriating. Such appropriation is fluid, initiating a dialectic of flows and closures. Africans today seek to partake of *Modernity on a Shoestring*.[120] The tension between Roman Catholicism as a product of colonialism and African historical religion, for example, has often been resolved in different ways. After decades of adamant rejection of historical forms of ritual practice, Roman Catholicism has sometimes become the very locus for the incorporation and continuation of local tradition (as we find in music, dance, and funerary rites) in the modern African context. Moreover, the Roman Catholic Church and its officials have played a considerable, though controversial, role in the articulation and preservation of philosophy in Africa (van Binsbergen 2005).

In this section, we have seen how colonialism was couched in hegemony and how it had a profound impact on African society as a whole. These North Atlantic values can be oppressive because they attempt to impose cultural values or ideology on others. Yet, I submit that instead of allowing oneself to be such a hegemonic victim, it will be rewarding to foster intercultural dialogue by producing counter-hegemonic discourses.[121] In addition, intercultural philosophy allows us go beyond hegemonic and relativistic tendencies about

[120] Fardon et al. (1999).

[121] I will take this up in detail in Chapter 8.

knowledge production in Africa. It suggests interconnecting the specificities of any local knowledge system with others, with the possibility of accessing the transcultural knowledge inherent in each system. It is this possibility of a converging, transcultural knowledge that intercultural epistemology exploits.

6.4. From anthropology to intercultural philosophy: Some critiques of Africanist anthropology

This section deals with van Binsbergen's criticisms of anthropology and his desire to put intercultural philosophy centre stage in academic concerns with culture. Anthropology, as an academic discipline, was created to sustain the colonial adventure under the guise of science, thereby endorsing the power/knowledge political system (Foucault). It was through anthropology that Western intellectuals generated knowledge about non-Western peoples, which was later used by colonial institutions to subjugate them into a colony in a bid to serve the interests of the colonial masters. This explains why it is impossible to imagine any anthropology without a Western ideological and epistemological link. This led Europe to create binary ideological paradigms whose vocabularies were founded on specific oppositional terms. As discussed earlier, Lévy-Brühl's main contribution to anthropology and to European ideas is posited in an explicit hierarchy of values in which Western values serve as an absolute reference.[122] The ideological and philosophical significance of Europe's contemplation of a world in which it was master due to the quality of its collective mind emerges most clearly from Hegel's philosophy of history, which, when all is said and done, is nothing but the celebration of the European spirit. This provided a powerful philosophical base for the chorus of denigration of the non-white races that accompanied and endorsed colonialism.

In his conception of philosophic sagacity, Oruka endorses anthropology and reminds us:

> One way of looking for traces of African philosophy is to wear the uniform of anthropological field-workers and use dialogue to pass through anthropological fogs to philosophical ground. (Oruka 1991:5)

[122] Nevertheless, these binary ideological paradigms are social constructs. They are interrelated; the one cannot exist without the other. See, for example, Foucault (1973); Mudimbe (1988); and Said (1978).

This method is interesting but is it interculturally tenable? Can cultural anthropology provide a valid base for intercultural knowledge production? Why must we transcend ethnography and begin to explore intercultural philosophy in our new conception of sagacity? Moreover, when anthropologists and other Westerners reject African cosmologies and epistemologies as *a priori* invalid, are they not overlooking the essential continuity between African and Western modes of thought, and do they not underestimate the world-creating, truth-producing potential of non-Western cosmologies?

Van Binsbergen is quite wary of anthropology in general and Africanist anthropology in particular. He asserts that anthropological research can also be a problematic mode of intercultural knowledge production. This is because anthropology depends on manipulated face-to-face relations, personal history, transference, and North–South hegemonic power. Van Binsbergen is a distinguished anthropologist of religion with experience in five different complexes: rural Tunisia, rural Zambia, urban Zambia, rural Guinea-Bissau, and urban Botswana. He takes anthropology so seriously that he wishes to transcend its historical and knowledge/political built-in limitations, as well as the defective general and intellectual education (unusually very unscholarly and rather blinkered) of most anthropologists. He considers that 'anthropology is more than just a sublimated form of sleuthing or espionage' (van Binsbergen 2003:73), with an ideological nature in the production of intercultural knowledge.

6.5. Anthropology as ideology

Van Binsbergen addresses questions of the politics of knowledge and the justification of what he calls a 'North Atlantic' knowledge practice. In his critique of anthropology, he discusses the works of one of the leading Marxist-inspired anthropologists of the 1970s and 1980s, Pierre-Philippe Rey. Rey's works make special theoretical contributions on the conditions for and the mechanisms by which an encroaching capitalist mode of production manages or fails to impose itself upon the non-capitalist societies of the Third World, such as those of Africa. In van Binsbergen's assessment, Rey's works demonstrate the impact of colonialism and capitalism and do not turn a blind eye to both local and imported forms of exploitation and how these are interrelated.

African societies (in Congo-Brazzavile and Northern Togo) are presented by Rey as people who interact, produce, and think like human beings and not just as essentialized

beings. His brand of Marxist anthropology seeks to render the struggles of Africans against capitalist and bourgeois ideology. In spite of his admiration for Rey's stance on anthropology, van Binsbergen finds Rey's approach lacking in several ways. Rey is not self-critical enough and does not explicitly criticize the ideologies of North Atlantic capitalist modes of production. Van Binsbergen reminds us that all contemporary anthropology, even Marxist or revolutionary versions such as Rey articulates, is produced by intellectual producers whose class position in the world system is based on dependence on capital. This dependence is mediated by the modern state or by large funding agencies, given that individuals cannot get the mammoth funding necessary for academic production today elsewhere. It is therefore sociologically impossible for this capitalist context of intellectual production not to totally determine the nature and contents of the intellectual products of the anthropologists.

Moreover, anthropology stems from actors who have their own specific class positions and interests. Even among anthropologists, the difference is quite clear between those of the North and their colleagues of the South. The mere fact that anthropologists from the North come from a certain class location there is every reason to doubt the authenticity and validity of their productions. This leads van Binsbergen to think that anthropology is produced more at universities, research institutes, and private writing desks than in the field. In this case, the researchers do not actually learn from the masses in the African periphery but revel in ideological constructs and try to remain submissive to the largely objective forces of a sociology of knowledge that obtains at a given place and time. Van Binsbergen's position is an invitation to a self-reflexive, auto-critique of anthropology so that the latter can avoid the products of a 'false consciousness'.[123]

Anthropology represents a form of intellectual appropriation and humiliation which Africans in the nationalist era rightly protested. This is because even the income used in the production is partly realized by exploitative relations between rich and poor countries. Anthropology is also a form of brokerage or caricaturing. Van Binsbergen writes:

[123] The term 'false consciousness' is derived from the Marxist tradition. It pertains to the state of mind of a group of people or individuals who have a distorted understanding of their class identity and interests. The German–American philosopher, sociologist, and political theorist Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) asserted that many people are not conscious of their true concerns and need to develop a consciousness that is consistent with their class identity and interests (Marcuse 1964).

> Another caricature but likewise with some truth in it: as an anthropologist I realise my intellectual production partly through a form of brokerage. I may buy my information very cheaply from paid assistants somewhere in the African periphery. Most information in the field, of course, derives not even from paid assistants but from unpaid informants on the basis of the anthropologist adopting or mimicking forms of exchange peculiar to domestic, antecapitalist modes of production, such as putative kinship, friendship, joking relations, neighbourly relations, etc. Here the anthropologist's role in the field as that of a broker is even more pronounced. Anyway, after intellectually processing the information I sell it at the metropole at a price that at least by Third World standards is very attractive: my academic salary. (van Binsbergen 2003:85)

Van Binsbergen shows us how ineffective, hegemonic, and hypocritical anthropology can be. This explains why he brands anthropology as being 'Eurocentric' with an entirely North Atlantic mission. 'Being' has been reduced to a world of 'objects' that are manipulated and dominated by human 'subjects' through a series of human-made logics.

Moreover, we can uncover an ethical problem from the knowledge/political arguments cited above: the participant observer is unfaithful to the communicative interaction and shared experiences of the community. In this case, the ethnographer is dishonest towards him/herself. Van Binsbergen reports:

> I became aware of scholarship's political and ethical responsibilities, and of the potential humiliation and betrayal of the people under study by social researchers in the field. In subsequent years, I was to ask myself more and more the following question: *Who was I that I could afford to make-believe, to pretend, on those very points that attracted the undivided serious commitment of my research participants?* Several among them have played a decisive role in my life, as role models, teachers, spiritual masters, loved ones. Experiencing their religion and ritual as an idiom (a symbolic technology) of sociability which I was privileged to share, I could not forever bear the tension of joining them in the field and betraying them outside the field. (ibid.507-508)

This leads us to doubt the claims of authenticity and validity for ethnographic fieldwork. The only kind of ethnography that could claim some intercultural validity would

be an intersubjective one. The ethnographer works closely together not so much with academic colleagues, but with his/her hosts. The work with his/her hosts should not just end in the field, but especially subsequently, during write-up, publication, distribution, and marketing of the written product. When such fieldwork experiences are rendered in terms of regular anthropological theorizing, they tend to betray social roles and friendship, and the full meaning of the local life interaction with 'subjects' is sacrificed. Van Binsbergen does not see, for example, why he should betray *sangomahood*, his fellow healers, and himself, and why the North Atlantic paradigm of understanding should take pride of place in *sangoma* healing practice.[124]

Nevertheless, just like Gadamer, Habermas, and Mall, intercultural philosophy can lead towards interaction that is free of hegemony and inequality of power. Deleuze (1988: 98-104), building especially on Spinoza and Nietzsche, does not see power as simply repressive. He understands power in a positive way, having a capacity to influence and be influenced or enriched. The power of an entity can receive the possibilities to act and establish interactions with other entities. Intercultural philosophy, as an academic medium, does not have hegemonic roots as cultural anthropology does. It rather unmasks concepts like 'Africa' and 'Europe' and shows how such concepts engender a certain geopolitical hegemonic agenda that often leads to exploitation. It tries to investigate the conditions for the possibility of other forms of interaction between different cultural orientations.

Intercultural philosophy can also provide a social science such as anthropology with important insights into how to cross seemingly unbridgeable epistemological differences by making radical existential choices. This is because anthropologists often think of cultures as closed entities and of contacts with other cultures as a rupture in the totality of a particular culture.[125] This is a wrong description of reality, given the cultural globalization of our daily lives. An intercultural philosopher or an anthropologist can try to speak in the name of the Other by identifying with the perspective of the Other. This interaction can foster the sharing of intersubjective experiences and mutual understanding. It is a call for an 'anthropology of

[124] See van Binsbergen (2003: 507-508) and Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

[125] We may cite the impact of the anthropological discourse on African ethnicity. Ethnicity was conceived of as closed entities. This discourse lays much emphasis on cultural pluralism and separateness of cultures, to the extent that there is no room for finding a common ground. In this way, the population of Africa are arranged into different 'tribes', each tribe having its own fixed 'culture', art, language, somatic features, political organization (including 'tribal chief'), and 'tribal territory'. If we rely on this anthropological discourse on African ethnicity, all we can have is more ethnic divisiveness, conflicts, and violence than is already there.

advocacy' to counter the discipline's affiliation with established ideological and political positions.[126]

6.6. Anthropology and intercultural knowledge production

In the section above we discussed the knowledge/political arguments against anthropological research. In this section, we focus on intercultural knowledge production by discussing some epistemological and methodological criticisms of anthropology, especially anthropological fieldwork.

The anthropologist gathers data through fieldwork (using interviews) and immersion in the form of life concerned, in order to make meaning in the context. Thus, cultural phenomena can be understood from within the context of meaning and can be experienced as they really are, in an *emic* way—that is, in terms of a locally lived model. After gaining understanding of cultural phenomena, the results can carefully and honestly be presented in academic writing. We saw in the preceding chapter that anthropological fieldwork raises the problems of access and representation. Modern philosophy, especially from Kant onwards, hinges on the understanding that to have direct knowledge of essences is illusory, and consequently all knowledge of representation is unavoidably based on appropriation and misrepresentation. To this we can add Quine's principle of the 'indeterminacy thesis of radical translation', which can be relevant to anthropologists and philologists in their bid to produce intercultural knowledge by supplying them with different forms of translation they can use. Hence, if both problems of access and of representation were given due attention, we would have to discard anthropology and adopt different modes of intercultural knowledge production.

Secondly, when van Binsbergen discards fieldwork and is personally transformed into a *sangoma,* he goes beyond just collecting ethnographic data.[127] This has intercultural implications:

[126] African intellectuals have tried to radically transform anthropology by exploding its Eurocentric affiliations and implications. We may cite the attempts by Magubane (1971); Mafeje (1976); Mudimbe (1988, 1994); and Mudimbe & Appiah (1993). This attempt is not limited to Africa. In the study of Asian societies and history, there have been intense critical reflections on the models imposed by North Atlantic scholarship, ever since the publication of Said's *Orientalism* (1978). This critical appeal outside the North Atlantic clearly shows that anthropology, as a mode of thought, is not a monopoly of the North.

> I was seeking existential transformation, fulfilment and redress, much more than anthropological data, across cultural and geographical boundaries. (van Binsbergen 2003:171)

Nevertheless, he cautions:

> [...] becoming an intercultural philosopher means a further step: one that amounts to integrating that deed in a systematic, reflective and intersubjective framework, in order to augment the anecdotal, autobiographical 'just so' account with theoretical analysis, and to explore the social relevance of an individual experience. (van Binsbergen 2005)

Van Binsbergen's positions show us how individual experiences can be beneficial in our creating new homes and in cross-border discovery, rather than our staying within the confines of ethnography. I think his experiences as a *sangoma* are welcome, but we also expect to find such fieldwork experiences rendered in terms of regular anthropological theorizing. This will be interculturally rewarding because it will appeal to the points of convergence and common values among different peoples all over the globe. It will provide a valid base for mutual respect and intercultural exchanges, and provide the possibilities for dialogue and tolerance. In addition, van Binsbergen invites us to discard anthropology and adopt intercultural philosophy in the study of culture.

In reaction to these critiques, the Dutch Africanist philosopher Boele van Hensbroek (2003) asks if intercultural philosophy should take over from anthropology in the study of culture. Even though limited to considerations from the philosophy of science, he ponders whether the limitations van Binsbergen attributes to anthropology are necessarily part of the discipline (and thus require its abandonment) or they can be overcome by a more elaborate practice of the discipline (and thus lead to repairing it). There are two aspects to the response

[127] Yet, some other anthropologists of religion have considered such a move simply as a form of adaptation to specific, difficult field conditions in a bid to get valid information. Even when they were initiated into a local ritual status, their experiences were presented, even by themselves, as simple strategies of adaptation in the field. We may cite the cases of Jaulin (1971); Schoffeleers (1972, 1979); Devisch (1978, 1991); and Fidaali (1987).

to this question. First, van Hensbroek considers that the failures van Binsbergen indicates in anthropology cannot be repaired. There is the possibility of a more elaborate cultural hermeneutics. This involves a kind of 'double hermeneutics', which suggests trying to understand the actions of local actors by grasping the interpretations that the actors themselves have of their situation. In this case, the academic analyst explains human action, but the action cannot be understood without, again, understanding the self-interpretation of these actors. This implies that, in principle, the actors can answer and 'speakback' (ibid.). This hermeneutical approach suggests that anthropology can be repaired if the 'speaking-back element' of the actors is given central place in the discipline.

Second, van Binsbergen discusses at length the status of North Atlantic theoretical and metaphysical frameworks, and he accuses anthropology of uncritical acceptance of North Atlantic paradigms. However, this shortcoming can be refined by the self-reflective hermeneutical approach *à la* Gadamer, which van Binsbergen does not highlight. For Gadamer, any hermeneutics necessarily involves a pre-understanding of the object. This helps us re-define the relationship between the outsider and insider as far as anthropological study is concerned (ibid.). Anthropology may at first sight look like a one-sided process of subjecting others to one's interpretation; however, it is possible to practise a hermeneutically sophisticated anthropology which incorporates both dialogic elements to advance interpretations and a self-reflective approach towards Western paradigms. In this way, I concur with van Hensbroek's inclusion of both anthropology and philosophy in our intercultural knowledge production. This inclusion will involve using both anthropology in its more elaborate hermeneutical forms and an expanded form of anthropology (conducted by both Northerners and Southerners).

6.7. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have tried to show that Oruka's philosophic sagacity is to a considerable extent a continuation of Western hegemony in African philosophy. The discussion focused on colonialism and its hegemonic influence on knowledge production in Africa. The colonial masters created structures aimed at marginalizing and exploiting Africans. Yet, this bittersweet encounter has caused Africans to move on. We also saw some of the weaknesses of anthropological research. Anthropology is largely discarded by van Binsbergen as a naïve and hegemonic model for intercultural knowledge production. This explains why he recommends that we advance beyond anthropology to intercultural philosophy. Intercultural

philosophy is basically a communicative, dialogic form of knowledge production, based on interaction and equality. Yet, Boele van Hensbroek advises us to be prudent with van Binsbergen's idealistic recommendation. The reason is that a renewed and truly intercultural knowledge production cannot be expected without addressing the incredible global imbalances—imbalances in terms of dominance of Western paradigms as well as in the more material terms of who produces knowledge and discourses, where and in what social and cultural environments. With almost all centres of knowledge production located in the North Atlantic, the cultural biases observed by van Binsbergen in anthropology may simply be repeated in the new discipline of intercultural philosophy. At the same time, I think van Binsbergen's insight can be strengthened by considerations about the political economy of knowledge production. Intercultural knowledge production in this sense would require dialogue with other dynamic, alternative logics than the North Atlantic one.

7

TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHY OF GLOBALIZATION

7.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I intend to go beyond Oruka's conception of philosophic sagacity in a globalized context and posit intercultural philosophy as a new path for contemporary African philosophy. The word 'globalization' has become one of the most popular words used in political and academic discourses to cover different cultural, economic, and political tendencies. Intercultural philosophy emerges from analyses of the present-day reality of globalization. It is therefore logical that, like every other branch of human life, philosophy today is also affected by the phenomenon of globalization. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1994), it is necessary to create new concepts, because only new concepts can form adequate solutions to the problems that are emerging within contemporary society. The need to create new concepts in philosophy is a truism of relevance because of the uncertainties and incompatibilities of intercultural situations in the contemporary world. Basing themselves on the work of Hegel, Deleuze and Guattari argue that philosophical investigation is dependent on the historical epoch and context in which it is undertaken. Philosophy must understand its own time and, in light of that, develop concepts that will influence the creation of future reality. The empirical research of globalization is obviously not the philosopher's task, but a spate of recent empirical research has demonstrated that globalization does indeed entail profound changes and has far-reaching effects. This will imply that our sagacity goes beyond the confines of a culture. Contrary to Oruka's model of a sagacity that is closed, I propose an open and globalized sagacity based on intercultural exchanges. This is an invitation for us to advance to new forms of knowledge production which better fit the present globalized intercultural world. The various transformations in contemporary experience necessitate philosophical exploration, especially in our elaboration of sagacity.

7.2. What is globalization?

As mentioned earlier, one of the most important social and political developments within the contemporary world—and, as such, in need of philosophical reflection—is the process of globalization. Globalization, the process of increased contacts among the different parts of

the world, is changing our reality. Globalization points to the oneness and interconnectedness of humanity. It refers to those processes by which the peoples of the world are incorporated into a single world society, a global society. This is due to the fact that the worldwide integration and interdependence of societies and cultural orientations is rapidly increasing. This is made possible by new information and communication technology (ICT) as well as by the increases in speed of conventional means of transport. In this way, globalization involves a profound transformation, not just of economies but also of contemporary experience as a whole. This is because technology has practically effected—towards the end of the 20th century of the North Atlantic Common Era—a reduction to zero of time and space as limiting factors in human communication. When messages travel at lightning speed across the globe using electronic media, when physical displacement is hardly required for effective communication (yet such displacement can be effected within one or two days from anywhere on the globe to anywhere else), and when the technology of manufacturing and distribution has developed to such levels that the same material environment using the same objects can be created and fitted out anywhere on the globe at will—then we have reduced the limits that time and space impose on the social process of interaction and communication to virtually zero. Globalization is about not just the absence or dissolution of boundaries, but about the dramatically reduced limits imposed by time and space for interaction and communication, and thus the opening up of new spaces and new times within new boundaries that were hitherto inconceivable. Globalization as a condition of the social world today revolves on the interplay between unbounded worldwide flow and the selective framing of such flow within particularizing, localizing contexts of identity and difference.

7.3. Globalization and its post-modern philosophical elaborations

The multitude of explanations that circle around globalization as a concept are based on the constant contraction of space and time in the world, and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole. Giddens (1991) suggests that modernity involved the growing increase of the interconnectedness across social, cultural, and class systems. He asserts that rather than looking at the integration of bounded systems, people need to deal with the issue of order as one of time–space distantiation (i.e. the conditions under which time and space are organized to connect presence and absence). Waters (1995), writing on the cultural impact of globalization, observes that globalization is:

> a social process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding. (Waters 1995:3)

In the same vein, van Binsbergen and Geschiere use the word globalization:

> as a descriptive term to draw attention to the rapidly accelerating circulation of goods, people and images on a global scale, since roughly the 1960s; the emphasis here is on 'rapidly accelerating' since it is clear that global circuits were much older than this.[128]

In this way, the oneness of humanity is often justified by appealing to the effects of globalization and the contemporary interrelationships of humankind. It is also important to mention that if our world today is recognized to be globalizing, this offers a context in which it becomes thinkable that globalizing tendencies did not just emerge under particular and dramatic technological achievements in the late 20th century. It points to the fact that human cultural history may always have had a globalizing tendency, and that the globular shape of our Earth has always prompted both the spread and the ultimate convergence of cultural ramifications. In the last few decades, long-range research within the social sciences shows that the phenomenon of globalization has a long antecedent history.[129] The Dutch sociologist Nederveen Pieterse conceives of globalization as human integration and hybridization, arguing that it is possible to detect cultural mixing across continents and regions that goes back many millennia. Globalization, as a process of hybridization, gives rise to a global mélange (Nederveen Pieterse 2009:65). The concept of hybridization serves as a hermeneutical tool for interpreting the cultural dimensions of globalization, as most notably exemplified by the works of Bhabha and Spivak. Since the 1990s and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the breakup of the Soviet Union, and the spectacular advances in ICT, the phenomenon of globalization has received a fresh impetus. Friedman (1999), for example, thinks that new forms of social and cultural globalization have increased in their intensity and interconnectivity.

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[128] Van Binsbergen & Geschiere (2005: Introduction).

[129] See for example, Worsley (1957); Appadurai (1997); and Nederveen Pieterse (2009). These authors argue that contacts, relations, and intercultural borrowings from different cultural orientations and civilizations are not new. Globalization, therefore, should be viewed as a long-term historical process.

There is a need to identify how Africans have sought to modernize and participate in the globalized world. In the recent past, and in some aspects, Africans took part in the global world as equal partners, but that is not the case today. Ferguson (1999) paints a grim picture of how Zambia, in the past praised for being at the forefront of the African industrial revolution, has declined economically and is now on the periphery of the modern globalized world. Brecher and Costello (1994) also highlight the uneven impact of globalization in African societies and communities, coining the term 'downward levelling'. Interestingly, they identify ways in which globalization can be countered. Contrary to these gloomy pictures on the consequences of globalization, Friedman conceives of the term 'glocalization', by which he means:

> healthy glocalization […] [is] the ability of a culture, when it encounters other strong cultures, to absorb influences that naturally fit into and can enrich that culture, to resist those things that are truly alien and to compartmentalize those things that, while different, can nevertheless be enjoyed and celebrated as different. (Friedman 1999:29)

He cautions that societies need to develop 'glocalization' in order to avoid further marginalization. Implicit in Friedman's view is the fact of hegemony, on the one hand, and the apparently static nature of African societies, on the other. Healthy glocalization can take place only when there is mutual cultural enrichment in the process.

Recent globalization has largely resulted in a blurring of the ideal-typical difference between Africa and the North Atlantic region. Under post-modern conditions typical of globalization, North Atlantic societies, too, have experienced large-scale erosion of meaning and consensus, fragmentation of identity, and erosion of the nation-state by elusive intercontinental corporate powers in the economic domain. In Africa, the percolation of global *linguae francae*, of global media such as television, cell phones, and the Internet, of globally circulating manufactured consumer goods, and of globally available religious expressions such as Islamism and Pentecostalism have brought the forms of African social and religious life closer to those in other continents today. These major factors of globalization have increased the global interdependence of economic and cultural activities. Increasingly also for Africa and for an increasing number of Africans, the neat compartmentalization of the world into sharply demarcated continents has become an idea of the past. This permits van Binsbergen to conceptualize globalization under the following aspects: proto-globalization, the panic of space, the panic of time, the panic of language,

rebellion against older inequalities, the new object, virtualization of experience, the new inequality, and the new body(van Binsbergen 2003:377-381). These are the main social and cultural transformations that are visible in the context of globalization. Nevertheless, have these processes of globalization actually become situated in local communities, in social processes and thought in Africa? In this context of globalization, what becomes of Oruka's sages, who operate in 'a culture'? Can we then talk of a kind of 'globalized sagacity'? I attempt an answer to these questions with an intercultural reading of Oruka's conception of sagacity.

7.4. Towards the globalization of African sagacity

We have noted above the impact of globalization on African societies and cultural orientations. This implies we ought to re-think our conception of sagacity as well. Oruka, as we have seen in Chapter 4, maintains that sages are 'indigenous' and have had no contact with modern education. He also argues that these sages produce wise sayings that can be used as moral and metaphysical counselling on human existence. This wisdom exists in a context and is limited to it. This position is quite similar to what South African philosopher Mogobe Ramose (1999) places to the fore of his *ubuntu* philosophy. As we discussed in Chapter 2, *ubuntu* is seen as a key concept to evoke unadulterated forms of African social life before European conquest. In his conception of sagacity, Oruka does not foresee the need for a globalized sage, and Ramose's work presents an explicit rupture with that view. According to Ramose, the globalization process is inclined towards economic maximization and has no concern for humanity. Globalization is one of those ways the North Atlantic region intends to perpetuate political and cultural hegemony.

From Ramose's argument, we realize that globalization is an outside phenomenon, driven by North Atlantic conquest, and has resulted in the destruction of *ubuntu*-based communities. Hence, *ubuntu,* as a form of African philosophy, ought to be revived to counter the course of southern African history and to remedy the trauma caused by colonization and the imposition of capitalist relations of production. Our study of intercultural philosophy endorses Ramose's point that *ubuntu* philosophy and southern African society have something of great value to offer to the globalized world. However, Ramose does not take into account the fact that both contemporary southern Africa and *ubuntu* itself are products of globalization. *Ubuntu* is a contemporary academic construct, called forth by the same forces of physical oppression, economic oppression, and cultural alienation that have shaped

southern African society over the past two centuries. In this way it can mask real conflict, perpetuate resentment, and hide the fact that someone is using *ubuntu* in the excessive pursuit of individual gain (van Binsbergen 2001a, 2003).[130] Hence, even though *ubuntu* may be able to curb some of the effects of globalization, it is a new concept in a globalized format, not a perennial village concept in an authentic format as Ramose asserts.

Ubuntu, as a form of philosophy, also reminds us of the necessity to patiently study the rich empirical realities of African societies before making any final judgements. This is because what the *ubuntu* experts present is a liberation of Black Africa by revisiting and romanticizing the past—*rétrodiction (à la* Mudimbe) or *rétrojection* (*à la* Towa). Ramose is concerned with re-dreaming rural Africa along dated ethnographic lines and consequently presenting a static view of traditional Africa. We must also admit that African historical societies have been dynamic, ever changing, and complex, and have been influenced by relations with the outside world.

To assume a self-evident, static African society is reminiscent of Plato's philosophy. As we saw in Chapter 4, Plato used his theory of Forms to account for reality. He argued that what is truly real is not the objects we encounter in sensory experience but, rather, Forms, and these can be grasped only intellectually. He used the theory of Forms partly because he assumed that the objects of knowledge must be unchanging and certain rather than changing. His student Aristotle contested this firm and unmovable foundation. According to Aristotle, even though things have essences (what makes them what they are), these essences cannot be separated from the things themselves. The essences of a thing exist in that thing, and that is why we recognize it. It is not being and non-being as Plato maintained, but being and potential being for Aristotle.[131] Even though Enlightenment philosophers rejected Plato's world of Forms, they endorsed the fact that one can build on firm, *a priori* foundations. I submit that in the era of globalization, characterized by intercultural encounters, our sagacity should go beyond Plato's Forms and be grounded in human realities and existential facts about the human being and his daily condition.

Hence, we must note that the *ubuntu* experts render a remote *etic* reconstruction into an alien globalized format, and not an *emic* one as they may claim. In other words, what we

[130] Van Binsbergen's analyses of *ubuntu*, however, generated some controversy. For more on this debate see, for example, Bewaji & Ramose (2003).

[131] In Aristotle's *The Categories,* 1a 24-25, he argues that all non-substances owe their existence to substances. Each of them exists only 'in' a subject. That is, each non-substance is in something, not as a part of the thing, and cannot exist separately from what it is in.

have as *ubuntu* is global urban reformulation of African values. If the notion did not take this globalized format, it would hardly have made any sense to the majority of South Africans today. Moreover, if we are to accept Ramose's conception, this would imply that African wisdom and globalization are polar opposites with no meeting point. It would therefore be impossible to effectively mediate this wisdom to the rest of the world. Paradoxically, if the whole *ubuntu* project worked, it was because southern African intellectuals were able to mediate it to others. Since the world is becoming increasingly interconnected and interdependent, it makes sense to think of a globalized sagacity. In this way, African wisdom traditions can be put at the disposal of the rest of humanity and not limited to a stable, immobile context. A great majority of Africans are exposed to globally circulating cultural, productive, reproductive, and consumptive models, and the influence of ICT. The globalization of African society is an invitation to us to utilize these technologies for the globalization of African wisdom. A globalized sagacity would help us develop an explicit counter-hegemonic discourse and practice in the global context. In this way it would facilitate promotion of intercultural dialogue. African dance, music, and *sangoma* therapy, just to name a few aspects of Africa, have become translatable to a global format thanks to ICT.

7.5. Oruka's cultural fundamentals in philosophy and philosophical debate

In this section we will examine how Oruka conceives culture and how relevant it is for our conception of intercultural philosophy. The notion of 'culture' has become an essential concept in discourses pertaining to our contemporary social experience and philosophy. This emanated from Western scholarship and subsequently in North Atlantic society, which has developed such great self-evidence as to assume a transcendental nature. We may define culture as 'everything a person derives, through social as distinct from genetic transmission, from the society that person belongs to' (Tylor 1871). Oruka, like many other philosophers, adopts this notion of 'culture' as found in cultural anthropology. This conception points to the existence of a plurality of cultures, each bounded, holistic, unique, and non-performative. Hence, many professional African philosophers and the wider African society have appropriated such a conception of culture, which combines claims of totality, unicity, integration, boundedness, and non-performativity. According to this view, a human being does not have a plurality of intersecting 'cultural orientations' coexisting simultaneously but only one culture with no options. Implicitly, such a culture has to be holistic (i.e. geared towards a totality, a whole) and, in consequence, intolerant of diversity. It is instructive to

note that this interpretation of culture is in accord with the modernist conception of collective representations as one, indivisible, individual subject with its own identity. As we discussed in the introductory chapter, such a unitary conception of culture only ignites the assumption (linked with ethnicity) that there is a Dutch culture, a Bakweri culture, etc.

Moreover, in contemporary public culture, the concept of culture is also closely associated with ethical and political judgements. This claim, in a concrete interaction, is linked to respecting a person's claims to basic rights and the 'politics of recognition' (Taylor 1994). In such a situation, a person may want to appeal to basic rights that have been privileged by public opinion and by bureaucratic and political practices and regulations. In this case, the person in question is not expressing a free choice but one that is determined by a specific 'cultural' or 'ethnic' group in which they have acquired certain practices specific to that group. This claim for respect expresses a conception according to which culture represents a total commitment, constituting the essence of the person.

This background information is vital in understanding the relationship Oruka establishes between philosophy and culture (Oruka 1983). He assumes that philosophy is a significant branch of man's search for knowledge of himself and nature. This search is often dominated by cultural commitments and prejudices. He outlines his study of culture with two theses, namely the universalist and the culturalist theses. The universalist thesis, according to Oruka, brands philosophical thinking or inquiry as a universal activity, unlike the culturalist thesis, which maintains that any philosophy is a corollary of a culture. However, the culturalist thesis does not deny that there may be a number of philosophical problems that are universal in character and can be a basis for transcultural dialogue in a world of unity in diversity. This implies that when persons from different cultural backgrounds meet to discuss philosophy, the issue of 'cultural universals' becomes evident. Cultural fundamentals, Oruka maintains, are obstacles to any meaningful philosophical dialogue and can hinder the 'birth' of potential philosophers, however gifted. By a cultural fundamental, Oruka means:

> [...] a concept, a style of language, a method of work or a psychological expectation that helps to mark one culture from another. (Oruka 1990:32)

He asserts that among the sub-cultures of philosophy, the cultural fundamentals are very important signs to be watched for in assessing the possibility of a success or failure in

philosophical dialogue.[132] A cultural universal, such as intuition,[133] is a way of promoting smooth intercultural philosophical dialogues. According to Oruka, intuition is a form of mental skill which helps the mind to extrapolate from experience and come to establish extra statistical inductive truth, or it enables the mind to make a correct/plausible logical inference without any established or known rules of procedure (Oruka 1990b: 28-29). Intuition is a rare quality of wisdom, of sagacity, which is found only in great philosophers, and in Oruka's Kenyan context among his philosophic sages. In summary, Oruka thinks there are different cultures and posits intuition as the mark of the 'great' philosopher (Oruka 1990b).

Kwasi Wiredu (1990) argues that there are cultural universals. He finds language (the fact of the existence of a language in all human communities) as the first proof of a cultural universal. Every human group has a language, and in principle, at least, all human groups can learn alien languages and engage in intercultural communication with the native speakers of other languages. These are skills of reflective perception, abstraction, and inference (Wiredu 1990:10).

Therefore, despite Quine's thesis of 'untranslatability', intercultural communication and understanding, Wiredu explains, are possible since untranslatability is not 'unintelligibility'. He finds no obstacles in both intercultural and intracultural communication. Godwin Sogolo (1993) uses the same argument against the extreme relativism of Winch (1964) and applies the principle of charity as formulated by Davidson (1984) as a valid intercultural approach.

The position of Oruka and Wiredu requires a slight modification here. The human situation today comprises diverse cultural orientations, between which there is a continuous interaction, both in one person in his many changing and inconsistent roles, and among a number of persons in their interactions with each other. People can communicate even

[132] He typifies this in his five mirrors. See Oruka (1990b: 32-35).

[133] The word is used in different ways in English. In everyday life the word 'intuition' pertains to 'gut feelings' about things. In the history of Western philosophy, it is primarily used by rationalist philosophers like Plato and Descartes. Plato, in *The Republic*, conceives of intuition (*anamnesis*) as a fundamental capacity of human reason to understand the true nature of reality. Descartes, in his book *Meditations on First Philosophy,* uses the concept to signify a pre-existing knowledge acquired through rational reasoning, or the acquisition of truth through contemplation. For Kant, in his *Critique of Pure Reason,* intuition pertains to the basic sensory information provided by the cognitive faculty of sensibility. Kant discusses intuition as something all humans have and certainly not as something restricted to great philosophers or philosophic sages as Oruka asserts. Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist Carl Jung (1875–1961) considers intuition to be perception through the unconscious.

without language. This reminds us that in our time characterized by globalization and multicultural society, the boundedness of cultures and languages has given way to human interaction, thereby creating the dynamics for social life and identity. Hence, if we think of 'cultures', with all the attributes outlined above, we realize that the tension between the individual and the community is concealed because it is enclosed in that conception.

Furthermore, if we conceive of self-identity with reference to cultures, we also realize that self-identity is inevitably and constantly situated in a tension between self-evidence and performativity. Moreover, on theoretical grounds, the supposed separate statuses of cultures risks depriving contemporary society of open communication, identification, community, and reconciliation. These are indispensable ingredients for our collective survival (Appiah 2006). In this way, intercultural philosophy promises to be one of humanity's survival strategies. It permits us to recognize hybridity as an antidote to essentialist notions of identity and ethnicity. This is because it revels in dialogue, exchange, and compromise between the positions that have been tenaciously held by the conception of culture.

Secondly, this view of culture also reminds us of multiculturalism and cultural recognition.[134] We must admit that local cultural orientations have also lost their self-evidence through their constant encounters with other global patterns of expression, organization, and identity. This implies that we should cease to conceive of cultures as bounded. This will enable us to learn from and give to any stranger in our community (Appiah 2006). Moreover, it is very common for people to acquire a new ethnic identity later in life, invariably leading to more than one identity in one person at the same time. Hence, it would be interculturally misleading to think that in today's world the individual has only one cultural attachment. This has implications for any discourse on an 'authentic', 'indigenous' African identity. In light of the impact of globalization in Africa, identity cannot be considered closed. Identity has to be conceived of as one having a flexible capability to relate with other identities.

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (1994) sees identity as culture-bound, a valuable achievement to be preserved in order to develop an authenticity against the backdrop of a shared horizon of meaning; and withholding recognition can be a form of oppression (Taylor 1994:36). The tendency to endorse cultural difference and the patchwork view of African societies, however, can promote divisiveness and ethnic tension. It does not give the possibility for intercultural dialogue in our increasingly globalizing society. In order to

[134] Young (1990).

understand cultural particularity, we ought to presume a background of cultural commonality. Multiculturalism should mean, above all, mutual enrichment by cultural difference and a search for the more universalizable elements embodied in various cultural orientations. We can attain this 'upgraded' meaning of multiculturalism through intercultural dialogue (Shen 2010).

Another major drawback of cultural recognition is that it may also perpetuate hegemonic, racialist tendencies even at the most local level of society. It can also promote stereotypes, prejudices, and racism, and give the impression that human life is reduced to an immobile essence. This can incite feelings of fundamental differences, enmesh us in relativism and identity politics, and create barriers that in fact do not exist. Mudimbe sees the idea of an African identity as a construct—the result of various Western power structures. The African identity has been constructed as the Other, but as a historical and collective Other. Mudimbe's anti-hegemonic contention is that Africa is an invention of the West; he critiques the way in which the construction of a European (or, by extension, North Atlantic) identity in the modern world has often taken the form of claiming to be the antithesis of what Europe (or, by extension, the North Atlantic) has constructed as Africa. Yet, for Mudimbe this identity is fixed—a dilemma we cannot free ourselves from. This is contrary to the view of French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986), who from an existentialist position sees identity as a product of daily life. Human life is a project determined by daily reality and not by abstractions and speculations. The issue of identity is not fixed but one that changes. We ought to have an active attitude regarding life in our social environment, as this is necessary for our freedom (de Beauvoir 1974).

Hence, any discourse on African identity should engage with the physical, daily reality. We should rather speak of cultural orientations, which inform us of the situationality, multiplicity, and performativity of culture. Our identity is not fixed, stable, or bounded, but open and flexible. This means respect for, and dialogue with, other cultural orientations in a bid to mutually enrich one another. This will enable us recognize and live (even beyond words) our shared humanity. Given that the construction of fundamental differences is a major drawback in African societies today,[135] intercultural philosophy remains our only hope in defining a credible and mobilizing formula for the revitalization of African societies beyond fundamental differences.

[135] See, for example, the contemporary anthropological discourse on African ethnicity in authors such as Barth (1969); Amselle & M'bokolo (1985); Fardon (1987); and Amselle (1990).

7.6. The hermeneutics of intercultural philosophy

The globalization process presupposes a plurality of domains, each with a distinct identity. These have been separately constructed and have been internally structured by processes of signification that are predominantly embedded in language. In this situation, how can we produce valid and reliable intercultural knowledge? Is intercultural communication possible? What is a viable method for contemporary African philosophy in a context marked by the high degree of global interactions today? We will present intercultural hermeneutics as discussed by van Binsbergen and the Indian-born and leading intercultural philosopher in Germany, Ram Adhar Mall.

Mall sees the possibility of an intercultural hermeneutics as a solution to the theoretical problems raised by globalization. Let us summarize the main points of his hermeneutics and see how we can situate them in the context of a philosophy of globalization, in a bid to explore the possibility of approaching the problem of intercultural communication. Like Oruka and most African/Africanist philosophers, Mall subscribes to the apparently self-evident conception of humanity as being subdivided into distinct cultures. He asserts that because these cultures exist side by side, intercultural understanding and interpenetration has to be achieved. He argues that intercultural hermeneutics stresses not only the sometimes problematic parallel coexistence of cultures, but also the significant contributions they may yet make to one another.[136] For Mall, the existence of many cultures is not a threat but a precondition for interculturality. In other words, the existence of distinct, bounded cultures is required before we can speak of interactions between these cultures; and such interactions are essentially non-problematic, because 'cultures can be explained to one another' (Mall 1995:99).

Mall rejects the idea of one universal world philosophy and also insists on the need for any comparative philosophy to be impartial. He argues that in post-modern hermeneutics, no tradition, place, or language should be privileged, as that could trigger the dangers of absolutization. His conception of intercultural philosophy is one that is 'placelessly localizing' and 'localizingly placeless' (ibid. 78). He proposes the theory of an open hermeneutics where one tolerantly acknowledges that the Other differs from that which one considers one's own.

[136] Mall (1995).

Mall's position presupposes a plurality of different domains and raises the problematic of how intercultural knowledge can be produced in encounters between these domains. For van Binsbergen, the 'placelessly localizing' character of intercultural philosophy posited by Mall tends to conceal the fact that localization undeniably takes place in this hermeneutic process (van Binsbergen 2003:386-387). Localization does not necessarily take the form of any geographical domain the size of a language region or a nation-state; the philosophical interpreter, with the use of specialist philosophical language, explicitly constructs this kind of localization.

Such intercultural hermeneutics will certainly be language-based. Our study of intercultural hermeneutics therefore urges us to re-visit the use of language and its implications. The language of the interpreter normally produces a universalist impression on the persons whose expressions are being interpreted. In fact, it takes the place of a touchstone that is situated at an unattainably higher and more valid level than that on which the matter is situated that it seeks to comprehend: the cultural Other and his/her manifestations. Moreover, language also has a major shortcoming in that it gives the philosopher a privileged position with regard to intercultural hermeneutics and communication. A large part of human manifestations is not framed and can hardly be expressed in language. Even though language has a clear structuring potential, it does not finally and completely establish the cultural domain, nor the entire limits of human cognition.

Hence, in the case of Oruka's search for and expression of sagacity, these should not be limited to language, given our context of contemporary globalization. Intercultural philosophy, from a wisdom perspective, should allow us to celebrate the human body as a transcultural common given, rather than relying heavily on explicit articulation of language as Oruka does. It should be an *encounter*. We can also depend on other forms such as bodily contacts, songs, dances, rituals, and rhythms, and on the forms of epistemological modesty such as silence, love, empathy, and introspection (van Binsbergen 2008). Intercultural philosophical hermeneutics will be more effective in our search for wisdom in a globalizing society through contacts in pop culture, on sports fields, on the Internet, during vacations, on the streets, in the pubs, in urban neighbourhoods, over the counters of formal bureaucratic institutions, in doctor's surgeries, and even in bed. When people come together, we see a genuine fusion of publicly constructed identities on a world scale, which is the real hallmark of contemporary globalization. Hence, wisdom in this context will not be in the essentialist sense of incomparably wise and eternal truths, or in the sense of an appeal to particularist, local authority figures—who may be effective and have valid knowledge in their local

domain but have no authority in other cultures, cultures which have their own ancestors and do not accept the authority of foreign ones. Rather, traditional wisdom in the context of a multifarious wisdom revival today need not be culture-specific, but it should be capable of generating valid knowledge across cultural boundaries. It challenges us to be aware of diversity, incompatibility, conflict, and the need to mediate these from those structures that do not constitute political power and scientific knowledge (Mudimbe 1988: xi). This explains why from an intercultural perspective, wisdom is characterized as a vital instrument to solve practical problems. In this connection, the American philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952) conceives of thinking not as a search for 'truth' but rather as activity aimed at solving individual and social problems. Whereas empiricism and rationalism separate thinking and doing, Dewey holds that reflective thought is always involved in transforming a practical situation. Philosophy should not escape by searching for fixed, universal, and immutable truth. Rather, it should be a problem-solving, pragmatic exercise.

In addition, such intercultural hermeneutics will not be one of cultural boundaries and distinctness but of fusion and exchanges such as we experience in contemporary globalization. As we have argued in this work, cultures no longer exist as distinct, bounded entities. Rather, what exist are numerous cultural orientations in which people interact and intersect. Hence, we can assert that the hermeneutical dimension in African and intercultural philosophy will add something new (methodologically and intellectually) into the African context. Yet, we cannot limit such a hermeneutic to difference, because cultural diversity is performative (Ceton 2005) and because in many respects people the world over share in a worldwide society, producing more and more similar environments and similar experiences at many different places. An example is watching the same film or wearing similar jeans in five different continents, due to the increasing globalization of production, distribution, and formal organizations such as the state, education, health services, media, and multinational companies (van Binsbergen 2003). An intercultural hermeneutic, not exclusively language-based, has become indispensable, as it will help us in self-questioning in order to attain wisdom that will enable us to better our human condition. It should be grounded on human life and existence. In this context, we can achieve self-understanding to the extent that the self relates to itself as it relates to the Other. Our lived experiences can lead us to understand ourselves as we relate with others (Dilthey 1989; Heidegger 1996).

Oruka is correct when he links culture and philosophy. Where I disagree with him is where he limits his vision of sagacity and culture to the North Atlantic paradigm and does not explicitly elaborate from his African base. He encloses African sagacity, following the North

Atlantic paradigm. Moreover, the North Atlantic paradigm is being challenged today with the possibilities of other traditions of wisdom. In this age, a complementary vision of sagacity will enrich the way we perceive and collectively solve our individual and collective problems. It can open up a space of existential and political possibilities. Our new conception of sagacity can be one that is dynamic, with a productive power that undermines the idea of reality as a fixed, unyielding network of authoritative patterns of interpretation.

7.7. The rise of more dynamic and optional approaches to 'culture', as from the middle of the 20th century

In today's world, the particular conception of 'culture' endorsed by Oruka—as reificatory, essentializing the African element, static, bounded, and non-performative—needs some critical revision since it is, in crucial respects, an incorrect description of reality (van Binsbergen 1999, 2003). In his conception of intercultural philosophy, van Binsbergen proposes a shift away from the more relative and parochial conception of culture as conceived by anthropologists and later adopted by philosophers. We may define culture as 'everything a person derives, through social as distinct from genetic transmission, from the society that person belongs to' (Tylor 1871). It is presupposed that within these 'cultures', communication and even interaction take place as if they were ontologically different, and even conscious and coherent, entities. The attempt at critiquing the traditional concept of culture as immutable and internalized and as a force completely dictating behaviour is in a way a product of globalization. For van Binsbergen, we cannot conceive of 'cultures' in the plural because they present a monolithic, integrated picture. In times of global interaction, van Binsbergen prefers to speak of 'cultural orientations'. The expression 'cultural orientation' is more appropriate because it incorporates the overlapping and the dynamics of space and time in these patterns of collective programming. It also points at internalization; culture is not conceived as a fixed, internal programming but as an option. Nonetheless, this does not deny the fact that components of such programming, notably those acquired in childhood, can become quite profound and indelible.

Cultural orientations remind us of the situationality, multiplicity, and performativity of the rhizome of culture and its inherent dynamism (Nederveen Pieterse 2009:54). Oruka, in his conception of sagacity, did not take into consideration the influence of some theories (in the course of the 1960s and 1970s) in which culture was conceived of as more relative and more dynamic. We may cite the Manchester School of Anthropology, which was founded in

1947 by South African and British social anthropologist Max Gluckman[137] (1911–1978).[138] We may also refer to transactionalism as conceived by Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth (1969). Barth rejects the notion of cultures as bounded and static entities and argues for the interconnectedness and interdependency of ethnic identities. He considers that the interaction and interface between ethnic identities give rise to newer identities. These more dynamic and outward-looking approaches in the study of culture would have helped Oruka to re-think his conception of sagacity. They would help to go beyond the culturalist thesis. This is my focus in the next section.

7.8. Cultural relativism and difference: Beyond the culturalist thesis

In this section, I will attempt to show why African/intercultural philosophers have been tempted to take the concept of culture so seriously and have applied it in their arguments. This tendency springs from the influence of cultural relativism in the philosophy of difference. The culturalist way of thinking consists in identifying cultural units and perceiving the natural place of a person to be within that unit. This thesis is based on an essentialist, bounded, holistic idea of cultures. I will go further, beyond culturalism, to show the limitations and implications for our study of sagacity and intercultural philosophy.

The concept of cultural relativism was developed by an American anthropologist of the 1940s, Melville Herskovits (1895–1963), who became a specialist on Surinam and published on this topic.[139] Cultural relativism is based on the premise that there are substantial differences in the beliefs, practices, and worldviews of different cultures. In cultural anthropology, culture was perceived as bounded, internally integrated, consistent, unique, and holistic. Within anthropology, this notion emerged as the obvious and inevitable outcome of the fieldwork paradigm that had become the norm in the discipline from the 1930s onwards: research of cultural and identitary specificity within very narrow horizons of space and time. This meant the anthropologist needed to study by trying to apply an *emic*

[137] See Gluckman 1964, 1967, 1969.

[138] The Manchester School of Anthropology emphasized the method of 'Case Study'.The method included detailed analyses of particular cases of social interaction to infer rules and assumptions. This school used the works of Marx and examined issues of social justice such as class conflicts and reconciliation in small-scale societies and organizations, and the tension between the individual and the society. Among the Manchester School anthropologists were Fredrik Barth, Richard Werbner, and Victor Turner.

[139] Herskovits (1973).

analysis specific to the 'other culture', which is considered non-performative (Beattie 1964). In summary, such a 'non-Western' or 'comparative philosophy' approach to interculturality gives the impression that 'culture', 'cultures', and 'cultural specificity' remain plural and holistic. In this case, culture is non-performative and static, endorsing the isolationist conception of the 'impenetrable Other' (Moody-Adams 1997).

Understandably, contemporary African and intercultural philosophers were tempted to take this anthropological conception of culture and immediately apply it to their own philosophical arguments without further revision.[140] To this, we may add the interest in the philosophy of culture with philosophers like Cassirer (1953–1957) and Dilthey (1989), who were out to address almost exclusively European culture. Moreover, debates on rationality and analysis of exotic cultures were also influenced by such relativist tendencies.[141] As we have seen above, cultural anthropology promotes absolute difference across cultures, with an inward-looking approach to the notions of culture and identity. In addition, the concept of culture, with its implied relativism, as borrowed from cultural anthropology, gave African/intercultural philosophers the possibility of taking a critical distance from Eurocentrism and ethnocentrism.

The assumption that the valid and invalid contents of a local, non-Western cultural orientation and society can be meaningful only if embedded in the North Atlantic paradigm is interculturally untenable. This assumption reveals the subordinating and universalizing format of North Atlantic science and philosophy, which most professional African/intercultural philosophers endorse but which we discommend.[142] Philosophers with post-structuralist affinities have challenged such ethnocentric views with alternative views that constitute the starting point for a non-ethnocentric theorizing of globalization, identity, and signification.[143]

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[140] See, for example, Appiah (1992); Sogolo (1993); Mall (1995); and Gyekye (1997).

[141] For more on this debate see, for example, Horton (1967); Hallen & Sodipo (1986); Appiah (1992); and Sogolo (1993).

[142] For African philosophers with a universalizing frame of mind see, for example, Oruka (1975, 1987); Hountondji (1983); Bodunrin (1991); Wiredu (1991, 1998); and Gyekye (1995). By contrast, those with a particularizing frame of mind posit that African cognition is underrated and does not receive the attention it deserves or the credibility it merits as an alternative way of understanding. See, for example, Senghor (1964); Outlaw (1987b); and Sogolo (1993)

[143] We may cite the cases of Deleuze & Guattari (1972, 1980, 1994); Mudimbe (1988, 1994); and van Binsbergen (1999, 2003).

African and intercultural philosophers also subscribe to the Tylorian notion of culture (Tylor 1871),[144] owing to the way post-structuralist philosophers such as Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze, and Guattari have thought about difference. In the history of Western philosophy, thinking about identity and difference can be traced back to Heraclitan proto-dialectics and especially to Aristotelian logic. Under the influence of Hegel and Nietzsche, mid-20th century thought—in the context of decolonization, the critique of masculine dominance, and the critique of racism—at first applauded difference as a liberating expression of the inalienable identity of a person or a collective. Hence, any attempt to reclaim 'the Other' as more or less 'one's own' on the basis of an extraverted discourse (Hountondji 1983) had to be exposed as a strategy of appropriation, of hegemony, and of denial. In contrast to their structuralist predecessors—especially Lévi-Strauss, who stressed fundamental difference as a primal strategy of human thought, and Marx, who postulated the historical inevitability of the struggle over material production and appropriation—these post-structuralists argued further. They have explored the very rich and revealing implications of Hegelian and Marxist dialectics—that any presence carries within itself the implications of its own absence, and that any difference carries within itself the implications of a non-difference (i.e. a state of being identical). In other words, the strategy of difference contains the possibility of both deconstructing and affirming identity at the same time.

The post-structuralists focus on difference and insist on cultural plurality and the patchwork view of humanity. They assume that different cultures have different traditions. Hence, it is unacceptable for one culture to be imposed on or to exclude the other. This is because each culture has the right to exercise and defend its own standards.[145] This view is also endorsed by communitarians who defend the preservation of multiculturalism. The culture or community a person is born into and grows up in has a great impact on the life of that person. Hence, they stand for cultural differences, the local and particular community.[146] To this, we can add fundamentalism, which is increasingly on the rise in our contemporary societies—for example, Christian, Islamic, and Hindu fundamentalism. Fundamentalists are opposed to modernity and globalization and focus instead on unchanging and absolute truths.

[144] Tylor's cultural evolutionism argues for the progressive development of the human from the savage to the civilized state in all societies. He also identifies uniformity in culture. Even though human societies evolve differently, in particular contexts, the human mind and its capabilities are the same in all societies.

[145] For a post-structuralist conception of difference see, for example, Young (1990).

[146] For more on communitarianism see, for example, Walzer (1985); Taylor (1994); Vincent (2002); and MacIntyre (2007).

These can be in the Bible, in the Koran, or in a 'culture'. They reject the idea of a common humanity and absolutize difference at all levels.

Derrida's philosophical position is based on deconstruction and difference (Derrida 1976). He used this method to criticize the assumptions of structural linguists like de Saussure, the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss, and the philosopher Husserl. He criticizes what he considers the dominant view of language and reference. As we saw in Chapter 2, de Saussure points out that language is made up of signs, and the sign is made up of the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the sound pattern, while the signified is that concept which comes to mind upon hearing the sound pattern. For de Saussure, these are psychological processes, and recognizing a sound is more complex than connecting a name with a thing. Derrida questions this binary opposition between sign and signifier and posits that such a relationship is arbitrary. This relationship is not hierarchical, essential, referential, and natural as de Saussure asserts. Derrida also argues that the rapport between sign and signifier is not very easy to recognize but has to be interpreted continuously. We get meanings from signs through interaction with other signs and meanings. For a sign to be distinct, it must also be different from other signs. It is difference in language which makes things unique, not different things in the external world. The free play of signifiers implies that meaning is not fixed. The same sign can mean different things in different contexts. This implies that we can hardly have an ultimate meaning since signs have to be interpreted in different contexts and realities.

Derrida also used this method to attack the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss (ibid.).He brings to the foreground the less privileged terms implicit in language. He argues that there is no basis for making myths into a fixed, coherent system; therefore, the philosopher cannot be an 'engineer' who finds unifying elements within myths. Myths have no single unitary source; hence, interpretation of them is not scientific but rather a product of the imagination. Myths have no authors and cannot give rise to scientific knowledge. Derrida's critique of linguistic structuralism and structural anthropology gives the intercultural philosopher several grounds to argue for cultural difference.

Derrida also used his deconstructive method to attack Husserl's transcendental idealism (ibid.). He agrees with Heidegger that metaphysics has been reduced to onto-theology, a term Heidegger used to describe the development of metaphysics since Plato. Metaphysics has increasingly come to reduce being to God. Husserl attempted to ground human knowing in a transcendental science of logic or a universal phenomenology of consciousness. Derrida elaborated on this development as a logocentrism: nostalgia for an original state of full being or presence that is now lost. Logocentrism is based on a preference

for a stable, hierarchical world of necessary being. This, according to Derrida, is unfounded and artificial. Husserl sought a transcendental consciousness that is beyond any particular, individual consciousness. This was based on ideal objects that had some kind of certainty and clarity as geometrical concepts. They are just like Plato's Forms, which are taken to be pure, universal, stable, and nonphysical. Truths do not need to be represented using empirical content; they can be directly intuited. Nevertheless, for Derrida, there is no direct intuition of these truths. There is only mediated, representational knowledge that is dependent on linguistic structures. Truth does not take place prior to language but rather depends on language and temporality for its existence. Derrida maintains that language and things change. Only through the playful use of language will the interaction between the presence and absence of things, as well as between their certainty and uncertainty, enter consciousness. Thinking and language can never be closed systems of absolutely certain, transcendental concepts; they are rather open and temporally limited. They ought, in some way, Tobe capable of dealing with things as unique, changing, uncertain, and incomplete.

The difference-oriented intercultural philosopher could be tempted to absolutize difference with an essentialist view of culture. Culturalism holds a number of assumptions about culture and presents several intercultural challenges. First, the idea of culture is contrived as a kind of separate 'body' or 'entity' which is strongly sustained by internal coherence and essence. Second, there is a notion that human beings 'belong' to a specific culture, that they should be anchored in it in order to be authentic. This culture gives us our identity, which is deeply rooted, and our feeling of authenticity as opposed to others. Third, the notion of culture tends to imply that everyone within the cultural unit naturally belongs together (what Hountondji describes as the 'myth of unanimity'). And fourth, there is a tendency to construct 'over conditioned' boundaries (Boele van Hensbroek 2001b).

Such a position is interculturally dangerous because it can lead to exclusion, racism, and xenophobia. Moreover, cultural relativism and difference do not give us viable strategies to live in our intercultural world of today. The culturalist thesis deprives us of seeking a common ground in intercultural relations, by encouraging people to live inwards and not outwards. People need to live together and solve their individual and collective problems. We need to move beyond mere passive acceptance of a multiplicity of cultures and rather promote dialogue and interaction among cultural orientations. We need to be tolerant and open to others. Intercultural philosophy endorses dialogue and frowns on the self-segregating tendencies among cultural orientations.

Moreover, contemporary realities contradict the idea of an unchangeable human nature and culture. Culturalism implies that a person's identity is pre-determined by his or her 'culture', and that man cannot choose freely or make decisions. We cannot know human nature directly because it is always mediated in myriad different yet intersubjective forms. Sartre, for example, thought that there is no such thing as a human nature that is common to all humans. There is no such thing as a specific essence that defines what it is to be human. For Sartre, the individual produces her/his essence, because no God created human beings in accordance with a divine concept. In the case of human beings, 'existence precedes essence'. This means that a person is what he/she makes of him/herself. Cultural identity is one of the identities a person may have. It is important to that person but it does not define his/her total being.

The culturalist thesis supposes unanimity in a community. This can be misleading, because people rarely speak with one voice in any given community. It is an overstatement to insist on a shared communal understanding; diversity is inherent in every society. Moreover, contrary to Walzer (1985), we cannot think of society as unchanging, fixed, and homogenous; people interact and borrow from those beyond their cultural orientations. It would be more rewarding to take into consideration the hybridity of cultural orientations (Benhabib 1992, 2002a, 2002b).

We can now return to van Binsbergen. He maintains that the conception of culture as bounded and distinct cannot be used effectively as a philosophical concept today (van Binsbergen 1999, 2003). In the context of globalization, we need to go beyond essentialist or fundamentalist traits. This is because migration and the cultural globalization of our daily lives (with new techniques of communication and information) have greatly reduced space and time. This makes it more evident that no cultural situation is homogeneous and that no cultural situation exists in isolation. It implies that cultural specificity can occur only by virtue of local, parochial boundary maintenance in the face of an expanding, worldwide field of locally available and perceived cultural alternatives. Moreover, what people claim to be their culture today turns out to be selected, arbitrary, situational, performative, and ephemeral, merely boundary markers of explicit difference.

What does exist, however, are numerous cultural orientations, shared with some or many other people, orientations which in each person's life and each situation intersect and interact. This intersection is problematic because of the power relations tending to hegemony and the hermeneutics of otherness, which are inherently appropriative and distorting. And

yet, human cultural history is informed by a common search for truth and a common epistemology.[147] Cultural relativism, for example, used to be a simple assertion against Western hegemony as seen in imperialism and colonialism. Nevertheless, we have to be very vigilant because this relativism can go to extremes and engender an immovable stalemate of positions, leading to fundamentalism and violence. Such insistence on irresolvable differences is insufficient as a survival strategy for the modern world. In order to face the future, we need dialogue, exchange, and compromise so that we easily blend and cross-fertilize our differences. Preserving what is unique and distinctive in our various cultural orientations should not blind us to cultivating and celebrating our common humanity, and intercultural philosophy helps us to explore the various possibilities that can ensure our collective survival.

7.9. Beyond Bernal's boundaries

I pursue my reflection beyond the culturalist thesis with a brief re-assessment of Bernal's study of Ancient Egypt. I discuss Bernal's *Black Athena* thesis because it has been a major inspiration for many African philosophers. This will help to bring out the implications for my conception of sagacity and, subsequently, for intercultural philosophy. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the culturalist thesis tends to over-generalize and absolutize cultural divisions. African culturalists tend to go back to Ancient Egypt, while their European counterparts favour ancient Greece. The impression we get is that cultural fragmentation is the original condition of humankind, whereas it is a secondary product of historical group interaction. In his attempt to compare Greek sages with his Kenyan sages, Oruka recommends studying Bernal's exposition of the Eurocentrism that has characterized North Atlantic research on Greco-Roman antiquity for the past two centuries (Oruka 1991:1-2).

One of the main objectives of intercultural philosophy is to create a philosophy that will allow for a non-essentialist perception of intercultural relations. Intercultural philosophy must account for the permanence within spatio-temporal social organizations but also needs to affirm the possibilities of change and interaction (van Binsbergen 1999). Intercultural philosophy must therefore deconstruct the absolute and essentialist differentiations that are brought to the global debate with concepts such as 'Africa', 'the Orient', and 'Europe'. These concepts miss the fundamental point of the 'globalization of diversity', of the mélange effect

[147] See van Binsbergen (2003), especially the Introduction and Chapters 7 and 15.

pervading everywhere from the heartlands to the extremities and vice versa (Nederveen Pieterse 2009: 70). This gives us the opportunity to rebut the racialist variant of Afrocentrism.

As discussed in the introductory chapter, Bernal identifies the African and Asiatic sources of classical Greek civilization (notably its language, philosophy, and religion), and he subsequently uncovers the non-European origins of important cultural orientations in the North Atlantic civilization, which is progressively becoming global anyway. In other words, and pertaining to philosophy, the *Black Athena* debate hinges on the non-European origin of the European philosophical tradition. This is suggestive of Egyptocentrism as a possible model of African cultural history. Bernal's works have the merit of placing Eurocentrism and North Atlantic hegemony on the scholarly agenda. Thus, he makes a lasting contribution to the liberation of Asian and African difference *à la* Mudimbe, and to scholarly production's self-reflexive awareness of its responsible, even though dependent, position within the global politics of knowledge. However, Bernal does not take into account the fact that Ancient Egypt and Sub-Saharan Africa interchanged ideas in various domains, such as modes of thought, symbolism and myths, childbearing, and state formation. Moreover, Ancient Egyptian civilization developed (contrary to what Bernal asserts) owing to the mutual exchanges between Sub-Saharan African and East Mediterranean/West Asian cultural orientations. Such heterogeneous and fragmented 'Pelasgian' continuities can hardly be relegated to a primal and exclusively African origin. The Aegean region looks similar to Ancient Egypt not primarily because of diffusion from Egypt in the Late Bronze Age, but primarily because both were the recipients of the 'Pelasgian' demic, linguistic, and cultural movement from West (ultimately Central) Asia. Subsequently, this movement also extended to Sub-Saharan Africa, producing the same similarities there (van Binsbergen 2011a: 327ff.).

Van Binsbergen (2011c) goes further to show the limits of the *Black Athena* thesis and of Afrocentricity as empirical explanatory models, in his search for transcontinental continuities and to underpin his premise of the fundamental unity of humankind. He engages in the comparative transcontinental study of divinatory (oracular, soothsaying) systems, seeking to illuminate the striking similarities that became manifest between the divination system he had learned as a diviner in Botswana, and other southern African divination systems and those further afield: the 'Ifa' and 'Sixteen Cowries'systems of West Africa and the New World; the 'Sikidy' of Madagascar and the Comoro Islands; the 'Sand Science' divination system recorded for southern Iraq c. 1000 CE and subsequently spread all over the Islamic world of South and South-West Asia, as well as North-East and East Africa (with ramifications into medieval and Renaissance European specialist magic and even into Early

Modern peasant practices); and beyond that even, the Chinese wisdom system of *I Ching*, puzzlingly similar in notational system and divinatory symbolism, with its enormous impact on East Asian cultural history. As highlighted in the introductory chapter, this transcontinental study of divinatory systems points to the undeniable empirical reality of massive cultural continuities in space and time and the fundamental unity of humankind. It also invites us to stress the transcontinental complementarity of the intellectual achievements of ourselves, anatomically modern humans, in the course of millennia.

The implications of this discussion for Africa and Afrocentrists are clear. First, it suggests that cultural orientations overlap regions and even within countries. We cannot talk of quintessential African values that separate Africa from the rest of humanity. The use of homogenous categories such as 'African' and 'Asian' can conceal the complexity of each tradition and overlook the history of cross-cultural influences between them. Second, Ancient Egypt had rich and influential contributions not just (as Bernal argues in his *Black Athena* thesis) from the East Mediterranean basin and consequently Europe, but equally had several intercultural exchanges in many aspects of life in Black Africa. Instead of a diversity of cultures, what emerges is the image of cultural homogeneity, which comes from identifiable historical processes. We may cite Ancient Egyptian civilization, Arabian/Islamic, and North Atlantic colonial influences (van Binsbergen 1999). Third, the approach of Afrocentrists could tear Africa loose from the texture of transcontinental continuities in which it has always thrived and downplay its own global contributions. Africa can be recognized and can affirm itself as a major player in global civilization instead of (as is the global reality of the last few decades) a disqualified outsider.

Furthermore, some lessons can be drawn for my conception of intercultural philosophy. We can say that culture is not bounded, not tied to a place, not unique but multiple, and easy to combine, blend, and transcend. We do not need to exaggerate the boundaries that exist between different cultural orientations but can blend our differences and commonalities. In a world where colonialism and racism are now left behind as obsolete ideological frameworks, and where Africa is no longer regarded (as it was by Hegel) as the continent of a history-less infantile state, the thought can arise that not Europe or Asia but Africa was the cradle of humankind (some 4 million years ago), and also, much more recently (200,000 BCE), was the cradle of anatomically modern humans—the species to which all humans living today belong. The subsequent 'out-of-Africa' migration of people and culture, on which the past two decades have brought near-consensus among specialists, then offers a fruitful paradigm to articulate and periodicize global world history by reference

to an Africa-centred framework. This will mean revising Afrocentrism by bringing it closer to mainstream global science. The study of ethnographic distributions—with emphasis on cultural (near-) universals of myths and wisdom traditions—will allow us to proceed beyond a timeless cultural relativism and begin to write a cultural history of difference, one in which Africa takes pride of place and in which the fundamental historical unity of (anatomically modern) humankind emerges as the ultimate point of departure (van Binsbergen 1997a, 1997b, 1997c). This suggests that in cultural analysis we cannot afford to ignore comprehensive long-range correspondences in time and space, across millennia and across thousands of miles. It is true that the essential cultural repertoire of anatomically modern humans came from Africa, but Bernal and Afrocentrists limit this origin to a much more recent past—the Bronze Age or the Neolithic Age, at the very remotest.

There is every reason to avoid thinking of cultural diversity, for it can affirm difference and endorse stigmatization and fragmentation. The assumptions of cultural relativism and difference can lead to violent ethnic, religious, and political conflicts (Sen 2006). The attempt to polarize humanity into fixed identities can bring only further violence between different groups. If there is any 'clash of civilizations', as Samuel Huntington(1996) would have it, it is precisely because of the way people have been categorized as fixed, without taking into consideration their ability to acquire new identities. In addition, the racialist alternative of Afrocentrism shows how the very language of identity (be it ethnic or religious) is inclined to the essentialistic assertion that identity has a pre-established, immovable quality, which conditions present-day qualities and functioning. Identity should be seen as being realized in a dialectical and mainly unpredictable historical process. This process is not one of a *remaining essence*, but of *becoming*—fostering multiple identities while constantly switching from one identity to the other, and being conscious of the arbitrary nature of all socially upheld identity.

7.10. Conclusion

Throughout this chapter we have attempted to highlight the impact of globalization in contemporary society. This globalizing process poses a major challenge for intercultural philosophy. There is the urgent need to reshape the philosophical discourses in this context, to meet with the numerous encounters that characterize contemporary life. African philosophy ought to be ultimately rooted in the everyday experience of the people living in historical communities, but it should also be informed by confrontations with the world

outside Africa, as is the case today. This will usher in a lasting and powerful effect upon the transformation of the lives of the contemporary African. From an intercultural philosophical perspective, where there are human encounters cultures do not exist as fixed identities. Intercultural philosophy reminds us that culture is pragmatic, as we must learn from other cultural orientations, given the fact that no milieu is immutable. This implies that we look for an African sagacity that does not limit itself just to a 'culture' but goes beyond borders. Our new conception of sagacity ought to take into consideration the oneness and interconnectedness of our humanity. We need to search for and construct a kind of practical sagacity, one that will enable us to deal with common problems across borders.

8

THE AFRICAN/INTERCULTURAL PHILOSOPHER TODAY: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

8.1. Introduction

In this concluding chapter, I wish to make some remarks and recommendations on the role of the African and, subsequently, intercultural philosopher today.[148] A more satisfactory way of dealing with African philosophy is to develop it into intercultural philosophical studies. In today's global age, given that intercultural encounters and interactions are a fact of human experience, there is a need for an intercultural philosophy. The underlying idea of intercultural philosophy is that there are many equally valuable philosophical traditions of significance in all regions of the world, rather than just a few, or one. Furthermore, there is a need to include the intercultural approach to philosophy because it will prevent any one philosophical tradition from adopting an absolutist and hegemonic position. Considering contemporary conditions, it is not difficult to understand that 'hard' Afrocentrism or Eurocentrism have become obsolete, as have other forms of centrism. This implies that we must not speak on behalf of others, who are well able to speak for themselves. In addition, these others may even be more resolute when speaking for themselves. We also need to critically assess theories before applying them to African philosophy. Hence, I submit that the study of African wisdom must become not a mere anthropological side-line, but rather a penetration into the very sources of philosophy. This will reveal the work of being itself in time as its creative power is lived and unfolded in the daily lives of Africans. This will proceed not with the ingenious hypothesis of an individual, but with the lived and tested experiences of African peoples, and it will involve patiently studying African wisdom traditions and values in a bid to translate them to the global scale and not the other way round.

[148] For the various recommendations made by African philosophers on future orientations of African philosophy and the role of African philosophers see, for example, Towa (1971a, 1971b); Eboussi-Boulaga (1977); Hountondji (1983, 1996, 2002); Gbadegesin (1991); Wamba-dia-Wamba (1991); Appiah (1992, 1993); Mudimbe (1994); and Gyekye (1997).

8.2. The need for an intercultural hermeneutics: Oruka on the scale of hermeneutics

In this section, I will attempt to go beyond Oruka's conception of philosophic sagacity by making some recommendations for a viable methodology for contemporary African philosophy. The mainstream approach that has been explored by most African philosophers is that conventionally referred to as analysis, or analytical philosophy (Hallen 2009). Another approach that deserves consideration is that derived from the phenomenological-existential-hermeneutical tradition, which is conventionally, at least as far as its African and intercultural manifestations are concerned, referred to as hermeneutics. For the future of African philosophy, there is a need to modify Oruka's and many African philosophers' application of hermeneutics. The standard intercultural approach has been the hermeneutical approach, but what are its potentials? And what are its limitations if brought to bear upon the contemporary situation of globalization?

Oruka applies the individual-hermeneutical approach in his philosophic sagacity, but we need a specific intercultural hermeneutics under contemporary conditions of globalization. Hermeneutics, in all its etymological nuances, suggests a process of making intelligible what was once foreign and impenetrable. It refers to the art of explaining human phenomena by vicariously articulating what they mean for the actors who originally produced them. In contemporary times, hermeneutics has received a great deal of attention in the work of Martin Heidegger and, following him, Hans-Georg Gadamer. Heidegger's conception of philosophical hermeneutics involves historicity and commitment to the existential horizon of one's time. This is the central element of being-in-the world. Understanding, Heidegger intimates, serves as the basis of interpretation and is deeply related to one's situation, but it is not closed in by one's situation. Gadamer (1975), in his specific form of hermeneutics, argues that the various frameworks that have been invented or created by human beings over the course of their history (including all the arts and sciences) should constitute the objects of obvious and important, if comparatively less fundamental, hermeneutical or interpretative exercises. The frameworks are not just about symbolic communication but also about human life and existence. The element of theoretical and methodological transcendence (universality) evinced by Heidegger is absent from Gadamer's approach. He mildly encourages us to have a self-consciously explicit appreciation of the fact that we all find ourselves in the world as products of specific historical, cultural, and intellectual contexts. Hermeneutics as 'interpretation' can certainly promote our understanding as well, of course, but always still for us as beings who have no choice but to continue to exist, to learn, to

understand, and perhaps even to struggle against or to overcome within these contexts. In other words, human understanding is always affected by, a consequence of, the various contexts in which it is sited. This implies that human understanding is always and inevitably interpretation, a rendering arising from the contexts of which it is a product and which it, in turn, may thereafter transform.

Gadamer emphasizes the role of the past in constituting any present or future understanding. Any understanding whatsoever, he argues, is conditioned by the affections, concepts, and practices of the cultural heritage of the participants in conversation. He refers to this as 'philosophical hermeneutics, whose concern is not what we do or what we ought to do, but whatever happens over and above our wanting and doing'(Gadamer 1975:xvi). Conscious that there is no idea or work of art that is 'proposition-less', Gadamer goes on to insist on the relevance of prejudice in the understanding process. Accordingly, he subscribes to Schleiermacher's conviction that 'understanding becomes a special task only when […] misunderstandings have arisen' (ibid.158-159). He also maintains that the 'recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice gives the hermeneutical problem its real thrust' (ibid. 239).

In Schleiermacher's theory of interpretation (Schleiermacher 1977, 1998), he stresses the importance of the interpreter in the whole process of interpretation. The interpreter needs to understand the text before interpreting it. Understanding the text does not come only from reading it, but involves knowledge of the historical context of the text and the psychology of the author. This means that understanding a text comes from what is common by our use of language and what is distinctive to a particular author. Hence, understanding other cultures is not something we should take for granted; it entails openness towards the fact that our prejudices or deep-seated opinions may turn out to be erroneous upon serious scrutiny. This explains why Schleiermacher recommends a strict hermeneutic approach, as opposed to a lax one, towards our own prejudices in a bid to guarantee a just or fully adequate understanding. A strict hermeneutic practice may help the hermeneutist not to be lured into the temptation of other cultures from his/her position.

Gadamer is aware that the negative side of the word 'prejudice' had been overstressed by the philosophers of the period of Enlightenment, who made human reason the one and only legitimate tribunal. For them, to achieve an adequate understanding of a subject matter, reason and method must be allied with one another against prejudice and authority. For Gadamer, this assertion is deceptive. In an attempt to rehabilitate prejudice (in both its *bona fide* negative consideration as well as its positive), Gadamer says, *inter alia*:

> It is not so much our judgement (about truth or value) as our prejudices that constitute our being. This is a provocative formulation, for I am using it to restore to its rightful place a positive concept of prejudice that was driven out of linguistic usage by the French and the English Enlightenment. It can be shown that the concept of prejudice did not originally have the meaning we have attached to it. Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. (Gadamer 1994:69)

In Gadamer's view, any hermeneutics necessarily involves a pre-understanding by the interpreter of the object. However, this pre-understanding, can change, because academic works of interpretation change, or owing to inherent cultural and political processes of change. This implies that hermeneutics is, finally, a never-ending process. Hermeneutics throws light on the object of research in ever-new ways, from an ever-shifting starting position. Hermeneutics, as elaborated by Gadamer, is an exercise in always re-defining ourselves in relation to the historical and cultural 'Others'. In this sense, it is an indirect way of questioning ourselves, of attaining wisdom that can help in solving the practical dilemmas we encounter daily. This is quite similar to what Habermas (1984) thinks of hermeneutics. The human being as a subject can only have meaning and understand others in life when he interacts with other subjects. This interaction and understanding takes place in the sharing of intersubjective experiences. Through society and language, man gains a 'pre-understanding' of others in the quest for mutual self-understanding.

In summary, the hermeneutics of Gadamer invites us to guard against the universal seclusion of philosophy from human reality. Any philosophy is an interpretation mediated by language, geography, and the cultural as well as the economic, social, and political realities that surround the human subject who engages in the interpretation, that explores the detail of existence. This implies that human existence and experience are universally applicable as a basis for interculturality. Hence, when Oruka limits African sagacity to language or concepts it gives the impression that this wisdom is stable and static, existing in a culturally and historically neutral environment. We need to move from an abstract ontology to a more practical, existential one, where the *Dasein* (Heidegger) or the *singular person* (Sartre) spread out to the whole of humanity and is not limited just to the individual. Moreover, Gadamer flaws the idea of analysing language in isolation from the particular social and historical contexts in which human beings use it. This is because language is so fundamental to being

human. It cannot be conceived of as an object on display in a museum. For Gadamer, language is like a living thing, a thing in process that is constantly adapting or being adapted to express new ideas, new understanding. Given that language is a means of understanding and communication, as we see in dialogue and conversation, this ensures that understanding is intersubjective rather than private. The contemporary African sage-philosopher is one who does not see wisdom as fixed or absolute but as something that is relative to a time and purpose and is thus ever changing.

The views of African/Africanist philosophers on hermeneutics give the impression that humanity is separated in a plurality of domains, each separately constructed with a distinct identity. However, contemporary realities point to the contrary. Contemporary conditions of globalization increasingly point to the fact that no cultural situation is homogenous, and that cultural specificity can occur only by virtue of effective boundary management against an influx of other cultural alternatives. Intercultural hermeneutics will enable us deconstruct some of the monolithic, absolutist, and exclusivist tendencies inherent in all centrisms. It will involve intercultural dialogue to help us avoid the limitations of culture-bound hermeneutic traditions. This is because, as French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) argues, we can know others and ourselves better only through our relation with the world and our life with and among others in the world (Ricoeur 1969). Our search for wisdom and its contributions to this global age necessitates moving beyond borders. It will require going beyond the particular context in which our wisdom is acquired. It will be one that applies the dialectics of the *emic* and the *etic*. This intercultural encounter can make sense only if these dialectics are free from prejudicial and condescending tendencies. This is what I propose to discuss in the next section.

8.3. Intercultural philosophy and the counter-hegemonic challenge

Oruka's conception of sagacity gives one the impression that the North Atlantic model of philosophizing is the only one and so has to be applied to Africa without any further revision. It also considers the European and subsequently North Atlantic example as incomparably superior to those in the rest of the world, and without historical debts to other continents. The entire project and method of Oruka's philosophic sagacity reflects the increasingly popular approach to be found especially among modernist African philosophers. They think Western science and philosophy is rational, universal, and objective and that applying this method in the search for wisdom to contemporary Africa is not a hegemonic imposition. Foucault opens

our eyes to the rapport between power and knowledge, and how these are used as a form of social control through societal institutions. However, today this hegemonic perspective is increasingly becoming obsolete. Intercultural philosophy, on the other hand, makes us see that there is a need to avoid hegemonic, essentialist othering and ethnocentric constructions—in critical awareness of the historical fact that the global North has, for centuries, sought to define itself by denying the global South.[149]

Mudimbe (1988, 1994) provides us with a lucid picture of how Europe has built and celebrated its identity, statehood, and cultural and scientific achievements and denied these very exploits to Africans. This hegemonic submission of Africans and their life-worlds was evident during the colonial experience and is perpetuated today in racism.[150] Mudimbe may sound pessimistic about the attempt by African intellectuals to deconstruct Eurocentric inventions when he observes:

> In these enterprises one notes a remarkable mediation between the rigor of a philosophical exercise and the fantasies of a political insurrection: the text commented upon is a mirror which reveals the self to the reader or commentator. (Mudimbe 1988:43)

Intercultural philosophy, on the other hand, permits us to formulate a critical reflection on the North Atlantic-dominated, hegemonic context in which African knowledge production takes place today. In this way, it can foster the expression of radical anti-hegemonic alternatives. Intercultural philosophy is a communicative, dialogic form of knowledge production. It does not involve the model of a subject gaining knowledge about an object, but a model based on interaction and equality. Cultural biases and hegemony need to be erased from knowledge production.

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[149] Hegel, for example, denied Africa a proper place in the history of humanity. In 1965, British historian Trevor-Roper was even sceptical that there is any African history to teach. He claimed that all history taught by Africans is that of the Europeans in Africa—and the rest is darkness, which will never be a topic in history. Ironically, one of Trevor-Roper's students, Terence Ranger, became one of the finest historians of Africa and contributed immensely to the creation of what his master claimed did not yet exist.

[150] The South Asians and Africans have taken up the counter-hegemonic challenge seriously—for example, by producing their own post-colonial theory, where 'hegemony' and 'the subaltern' are key concepts. To name some key figures: Césaire (1950); Memmi (1965); Fanon (1967a, 1967b); Nkrumah (1970); Said (1978); Bhabha (1986); Spivak (1987, 1988, 1990); Mudimbe (1988, 1994); and Mbembe (2001).

Moreover, contemporary mainstream North Atlantic philosophy itself has largely given up the possibility of a privileged vantage point from which to overlook the world and humanity objectively, dispassionately, and authoritatively. Nevertheless, contemporary African philosophy or any other philosophical tradition in the world cannot claim such a vantage position either. The intercultural philosophical perspective does not deny the validity of any particular philosophical perspective. What intercultural philosophy shuns is the tendency for any of the globally available philosophical perspectives to claim a monopoly on validity. Intercultural philosophy helps us see the hegemonic situation and discommends the imposition of Western standards of philosophy on the non-Western philosophical traditions. This will require exposing North Atlantic hegemony and condescension, on the one hand, and trying to situate Africa globally, on the other. This implies philosophical interaction between the North Atlantic and African and other globally available philosophical traditions. Hence, there is a need for African voices to correct the distortions so typical of Western intellectual appropriations of African life and thought. Even though this is typically expected to be an intellectual debate, waged in cities and universities far away from the villages and the poor urban compounds, we need the forceful input of oral-based local African thought. Oruka's project and thesis reveals a wide range of inspirations in the search for African wisdom. Yet, his essential dilemma was that he was wedded to Western-style philosophy to such an extent that the regional and local qualities of African knowledges had to remain a declared possibility for him, but never became a tangible and lived, central reality.

8.4. Crossing cultural boundaries with African wisdom traditions

I submit in this section that Oruka's fascination for the modernist brand of philosophy and its uncritical adaptation in his search for African wisdom also requires serious revision. This fascination and adaptation are hegemonic and condescending, as noted above. Will Oruka, and contemporary African philosophers, not derive anything of lasting intercontinental, nay global, value from African knowledge traditions? Did Africa receive only and not give anything suitable for intercultural knowledge production? Is the African position merely an invitation to take the North Atlantic hegemonic heritage with a slight pinch of salt, as Oruka implicitly does, but not to flavour it and augment it more radically with whatever world culture can learn from African knowledge traditions?

Oruka's adaptations of the North Atlantic model in his search for wisdom in traditional Africa realistically require major adaptations. This is understandable given his

inspiration from the dominant mainstream academic philosophical tradition of Western thought at the time. Yet, today's realities, as we see in cultural globalization, which largely inspire the substance of intercultural philosophy, make us take a critical distance with the philosophy of Oruka. North Atlantic science cannot claim to have a monopoly on the truth. Intercultural mingling privileges border-crossing and subverts nationalism and identity politics. The growing awareness of globalization and cultural difference is not simply contradictory, but interdependent. Thus, 'African' sagacity should be conceived as compatible with and transferable into other cultural orientations. This is an active step ahead, as opposed to the mere passive acceptance of a plurality of life-worlds and resigning oneself to the non-negotiability of that plurality.

Hence, in order for contemporary African/Africanist philosophers to make a tangible contribution to the development of philosophy, they ought to be forcibly counter-hegemonic rather than resigning themselves to marginal revisionism. The latter is often the position of peripheral powerlessness, to which the global system condemns African thinkers today. African thinkers also need to engage in a balancing act between African essentialism and a globalizing or universalizing detachment, between deconstruction and affirmation, between Africa and the rest of the world. The contemporary African philosopher needs to avoid such hegemonic assault by exploring and projecting the potential relevance of comparative Africanist models in a global perspective. Oruka does not exclusively project the life-worlds, the cosmologies, the languages, the day-to-day struggles and the pastimes, the religious, artistic, culinary, and sexual expressions, the political and legal institutions, and so on of African people, whose lives are greatly affected, even though not completely determined, by these various factors. The anti-hegemonic and comparative Africanist in the context of globalization will enable the contemporary African philosopher to explore and throw additional light on the specifically traditional African forms of expressing wisdom.

Finally, in our global age the intercultural philosopher needs to address the issue of an intercultural epistemology. It will consist in systematizing local wisdom so that it becomes intelligible in other cultural orientations. The intelligibility of local wisdom becomes a condition *sine qua non* for its share ability. This converging epistemological foundation can help inspire new ideas, enrich our perception of life-worlds, and ensure our collective survival. Hence, if we conceive of intercultural epistemology, we do not need to rely exclusively on those epistemologies determined by North Atlantic intellectual traditions. This implies taking African and other global epistemologies seriously. Van Binsbergen sums up this task with these encouraging words:

> Anyway, the task of intercultural epistemology is not to solve the riddles of the world, but to call attention to the world-wide diversity of approaches vis-à-vis those riddles, other people's promising attempts at such resolution, and to help create an intercultural framework within which these can be appreciated. (van Binsbergen 2003:278)

Throughout this work, I have been exploring Oruka's philosophic sagacity, showing rationality in indigenous African philosophy. For Oruka, philosophic sagacity is better placed than the other trends he identifies in contemporary African philosophy. I propose intercultural philosophy as a viable approach for contemporary African philosophy in the current globalizing framework. Oruka postulates philosophic sagacity—a reflection of some individuals in a given 'culture'; yet, such a conception of culture is highly problematic, as it bases itself on boundaries that are gradually eroding in our global context. In his conception of intercultural philosophy, van Binsbergen chides the North Atlantic anthropological concept of culture that is applied to African philosophy without further revision. Cultures do not exist (at least, *not any more*) in the sense of closed, discrete bounded units. What exists in contemporary conditions of globalization is a plurality of overlapping cultural orientations. With *sangoma* wisdom, van Binsbergen leads us to see that culture is not tied to a place. In interpreting and naming the 16 possible combinations of the *sangoma* tablets, he shows us that they are similar to 10th century Arabian magic and to the Chinese *I Ching,* whose astrological implications had been elaborated much earlier in Babylonia. Crossing cultural boundaries with healing and knowledge production make us see that the boundaries between the seemingly unrelated therapy and knowledge systems across the world are relative and porous. In addition to their being rooted in the shared experience of the human body and mind, to some degree they share a common inspiration and intellectual past. Moreover, African philosophy today is largely tributary to the North Atlantic academic philosophical tradition, which is a hegemonic imposition in the political, ideological, economic, and cultural domains. In his conception of sagacity, Oruka implicitly, but not explicitly, counters this hegemony. His individual philosophic sages must resemble Western sages and revel in the North Atlantic philosophical tradition. Van Binsbergen's vision of *sangoma* wisdom goes beyond asserting African wisdom through the eyes of North Atlantic science. He does not just interview wise people as Oruka does, but he tries to look for wiser ways of helping them go through their daily problems. Hence, when he becomes a diviner-priest, he uses this

wisdom for healing and transformation of individual and collective lives. In contrast to Oruka, who limits sagacity to abstract thinking (*sophia*), it would be more rewarding to broaden African wisdom to practical matters (*phronesis*). This practical approach to wisdom contributes to an intercultural therapy, to health and psychological assistance nearer to people's experiential and existential lives. We need to blend both *sophia* and *phronesis* for a richer African sagacity. We also need to blend the *emic* and *etic* approaches in our quest for sagacity. Moreover, we cannot claim, as Oruka does, that African sagacity is uniquely African. African sagacity has benefitted from its contacts with other wisdom traditions. We see that in the answers Oruka's sages in Kenya give when they are interviewed.

The principal challenge facing the African philosopher today lies in his/her ability to engage in a balancing act, between deconstruction and affirmation, between African essentialism and globalizing or universalizing detachment, and between Africa and the world. African philosophy should not be conceived of as just an abstract and academic undertaking with no bearing on African life today as Oruka implies. A new African philosophy should be one that consistently seeks to contribute to solving individual and collective predicaments. In this way we incorporate both the theoretical and practical side of wisdom in a bid to activate human virtue. This will require an African philosophy that remains close to the everyday experience of people living in historical communities, who are trying to conceive of and understand the world close to them, to face both domestic and outside threats. Even though these modes of thought may have stood out emphatically as foreign imports, they have had a lasting and powerful effect upon the modern transformation of African lives. The wisdom of intercultural mediation and negotiation remains quite a fundamental and promising challenge of our time. We must affirm local wisdom in African cultural domains, but we should also find ways to negotiate these local wisdoms into a wider context in a bid to contribute to other global wisdom traditions.

Mudimbe (2005) asserts that in spite of the diversity and variety inherent in African philosophy and beyond the sterile debate on its 'existence' or 'inexistence', what affirms itself amazingly is simply the vocation of something called philosophy. In his mind, this philosophy actualizes itself as a perpetual *récommencement* (an on-going process).In this case, I would propose a redefinition and re-articulation of sagacity in the globalized intercultural context. Such sagacious knowledge ought to be fluid and flexible, rather than fixed and unchanging. Beyond all facile solutions, beyond all limited horizons imposed upon us by anthropologists, we must have courage and make a fresh intercultural start. This will

imply an intercultural philosophy that enriches and promotes a hegemony-free interaction of cultural orientations, in a bid to complement each other for our collective survival. This is an invitation and a challenge! Will we take it up or turn away?

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